Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism
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Is Nation 'One of the Most Puzzling and Tendentious Items in the Political Lexicon'?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to clarify the meaning of the concept of nation, which has often been described as a puzzling concept. I propose first to analyse various definitions of nation, focusing on whether they imply that nations exist and what this means if so, or in what sense they exist. I distinguish four ways of approaching this. I evidence the shortcomings of each approach, and argue that the best one is that proposed by Brubaker: to focus on nationalization as a process and on nationness as a variable, rather than on 'nations' as discrete groups. Second, I show how this approach can benefit from Rosch's theory of categorization, Gellner's definition of nationalism, and Mann's theory of the centralization of the state. Finally, I argue that what Gellner called the 'weakness of nationalism' explains the puzzle of 'nations': although nationalization contributes to shaping society according to the principle of nationalism, it only succeeds to a certain degree, leaving nations always unfinished and impossible to identify clearly.

Introduction

Highlighting the obscure meaning of the concept of nation is very common in the sociology of nationalism or in the history of national states: Walker Connor wrote that the 'essence of a nation is intangible' (1978:300) and Charles Tilly that nation is 'one of the most puzzling and tendentious items in the political lexicon' (1975:6). In *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (1975), Tilly explains that his team's original project was to write a history of states and nations. Since nation was such a puzzling and tendentious concept, they preferred to focus on the state. Similarly, Eric Hobsbawm (1990) suggests starting as an agnostic on

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the definition of nation. The meaning of a word which is banal in everyday talk appears thus to become difficult to pinpoint when it becomes the object of analytical investigation. It is a strange puzzle, but nevertheless rather common in philosophy and the social sciences.

Theoretical and historical research on nations often focuses on the origin of nations and on the debates between primordialist and modernist explanations (Smith 1998). An important body of literature examines the relative importance of cultural and political dimensions of the concept of nation (Brubaker 2004; Calhoun 1993; Kuzio 2002; Smith 1986, 1998; Tambini 1998). I shall focus on an important question related to this literature, which is the problem of the existence of nations. To use Rogers Brubaker's opposition, I shall thus examine whether sociologists should assume that nations really exist and should use 'nation' as an analytical category describing a social reality, or whether they have to consider 'nation' only as a category of practice, a category used by actors.

To tackle this problem, I analyse definitions of nation in the sociology of nationalism and distinguish four ways of approaching the question of whether nations exist. The distinctions I make are directly related to this issue of the existence of nations. My typology therefore differs from most classical typologies that deal with distinctions of civic, political or ethnocultural concepts of nation. My objective is thus not to give an exhaustive review of the uses of the various concepts of nation, but to distinguish different strategies to cope with the problem of its existence. I spell out these strategies and their shortcomings from philosophical and sociological points of view. I argue that Brubaker offers the most important approach: to focus on nationalization as a process and nationness as a variable, rather than on 'nations' as discrete groups. However, I also argue that this is not sufficient on its own, for we need to understand what the consequences of this process are and, especially, why we cannot merely consider that nations as discrete groups are the outcome of the process of nationalization. It requires us to pinpoint the mechanisms that underpin this process of nationalization and to understand why and to what extent it can fail.

In the second part I propose to describe those mechanisms by reconciling insights from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Eleanor Rosch's theory of categorization, Michael Mann's theory of the nation-state, and Ernest Gellner's definition of nationalism. In the third part, I argue that Gellner's idea of a 'weakness of nationalism' and classical sociological mechanisms explain why even though the processes of nationalization are very powerful, nations are still contested realities and hard to identify.

Four Approaches to the Existence of Nations

I distinguish four ways of approaching the question of whether nations exist that underpin the various definitions of nation. These different approaches correspond to classical oppositions. Hence, when it is difficult to define a group, one can give a multidimensional definition of this group (objectivism), or define the group only by the fact that people believe that the group exists (subjectivism). The third approach is to empty the concept of its most problematic

elements, which we shall call eliminativism, while the fourth is to insist that the research should only focus on the categorizations that actors use and their consequences. We shall call this last approach 'constructivism'. I thus describe different ways to tackle the problem of the existence of nations when defining them. The objective is to distinguish specific philosophical arguments on which to build my approach. I do not argue that authors always adopt only one of those approaches. Very often, they can use arguments that mix these different approaches or change from one to another.

The objectivist approach

Ordinary representations of nations are objectivist, they assume that nations exist as 'things-in-the-world' (Brubaker 2004). These definitions can use various criteria, referring either to cultural characteristics or to political ones. The objectivist approach often leads to a conflation of nation and society (Tambini 1998). According to Calhoun (1999), 'a tacit understanding of what constitutes a "society" has been developed through implicit reliance on the idea of "nation" '. This is, for example, the case of Marcel Mauss' definition:

> We understand nation as a materially and morally integrated society with a stable centralized power, with determined borders, a relative moral, mental, and cultural unity. Inhabitants consciously support the state and the laws of this nation. (Mauss 1953:15)

This definition is multidimensional; it combines a great diversity of criteria: political power, cultural unity, and the assumption that people consciously support the state. It assumes that there really is a social reality that can be called 'nation', it just has to be defined across many dimensions. In that case, using many different criteria follows from adopting an objectivist stance: nation is really a special kind of group and the concept of nation has to account for its unity. However, it is hard to find a single criterion that all nations share. This leads one to look for several characteristics beyond cultural and political criteria such as a common economy or a common system of laws, such as in the definition that Anthony Smith gave in 1991 in his book *National Identity*:

> A nation can therefore be defined as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members. (Smith 1991:14)

All these approaches, whether they use many criteria or only one, always encounter the same difficulty: nations are diverse and it is easy to find many counter-examples to any specific definition. As Michael Billig noted, the world of nations is composed of a:

> hotchpotch of bizarrely shaped and sized entities, lodging tightly, sometimes uncomfortably, up against one another. There are monoglot states, and there are polyglot states. There is a state like Iceland with comparative

cultural and linguistic homogeneity, and a state like India with its mass of religions and languages. (Billig 1995:23)

Billig mentions cultural characteristics such as language or religion, but we could make the same remark about economic criteria or legal ones. What can be common to nations such as China, India, the United States, and Switzerland? Aside from their internal cultural diversity, they also have very different legal and economic systems. The 'hotchpotch' described by Billig therefore makes it unlikely that we will find a list of necessary and sufficient criteria for being a nation. It is why most scholars tend to use more subjective criteria.

The subjectivist approach

The subjectivist approach uses only one criterion: the feeling of belonging to the nation. In some sense, it is still objectivist, because this approach assumes that nations exist, but it does so in a different sense, so it can be distinguished from a traditional objectivist approach. The most common subjectivist thesis is the 'imagined community' of Benedict Anderson (2006). Nations are defined by the fact that people, despite their objective differences, imagine that they form a community. This subjectivist approach seems to be the simplest one. It appears sometimes to be the only possibility even to those who are aware of its shortcomings. The best example is Hobsbawm (1990). After having criticized the subjectivist definition for being as insufficient as the objectivist one, he advocated for 'agnosticism' (*ibid*.:8), refusing to give a definition. However, in the same paragraph, he assumes as an 'initial working assumption' (*ibid*.:8) that nation is a group that considers itself to be a nation.

A subjectivist approach is indeed a more accessible and more acceptable approach, especially in the contemporary social sciences where there is an attempt to avoid essentialism or reification. However, defining a group by the fact that people believe in the existence of the group has numerous shortcomings. It is one way of overcoming the difficulty of finding various criteria to define the group, which always seems to be an impossible task, but it is also easily subject to criticism. Hobsbawm noted the problem of this subjectivist definition well: the diverse ways in which the people conceive national belonging and the fact that national belonging is not a matter of choice. What share of nation-believers do we need within a population to create a nation? Half? A large majority? Moreover, what if a group of people see themselves as forming a separate nation to the state in which they find themselves? Does it matter if those who inhabit the same state with them do not recognize their claim to nationhood? Does recognition by another state affect this? Therefore, when does a people which thinks of itself as a nation actually become a nation?

The feeling of belonging is far from solving the issue: it is not unanimous, it can be contested, and it does not correspond to the political divisions between nation-states. Furthermore, people have many ways of defining belonging to a group in biological and cultural terms: one can speak of groups being Nordic

or Latino, which associates biological, geographical, and cultural characteristics. Some groups are considered as belonging to the same population, but nevertheless distinguished on a national basis like the Arabs, who can be divided into many national groups. In all these ways of defining groups of humans, why are some of them regarded as a nation but not others? Subjectivist definitions attempt to bypass this problem but in fact only lead back to it. From all the different ways to define oneself as a group, why do some count as national and others not? Is it just the fact of using the word 'nation', or are there some common grounds to these various uses of the term nation for defining oneself? In order to answer this question, we must turn again to the definition of nation.

The eliminativist approach

The difficulty experienced in defining nation can push researchers to abandon the term or to empty from it most of its meaning, which more or less amounts to the same thing. This is the case of authors who are more interested in political issues, like Anthony Giddens. He gives a striking definition of nation:

> a collectivity existing with a clearly demarcated territory, which is subject to a unitary administration, reflexively monitored both by the internal state apparatus and those of the other states. (Giddens 1985:116)

We are now very far from all the previous definitions: this one does not refer any more to a people, a culture, a common language, or a subjective feeling of belonging. It is a political definition: nation corresponds only to the people on a specific territory controlled by an administrative power. In the definitions of Smith and Mauss, nation was used to describe the whole society, but it was assumed that the society had a complex set of characteristics to account for its unity. Here, nation is still the whole society; however, it is assumed that there is nothing in common to all the members of the nation apart from living under the same governing power.

I describe this approach as eliminativist, for there is no definition of nation, the state becomes the only real object of investigation. As Elie Kedourie (1960) puts it, nation is the population living under the power of a state. Hobsbawm's view lies between this approach and the subjectivist one. He wrote that it does not make sense to speak of a nation without speaking of the state. John Breuilly is also close to this perspective, for he focuses on nationalism as a movement that 'seeks the autonomy for the nation', which he only designates as 'usually comprehending all or most social groups in a certain territory' (Breuilly 2013:150).

We have here an attractive solution. It enables us to focus on what seems to be the real social fact: the state which controls a territory. However, by changing our current use of the term, this approach generates its own problems. Why should we use the concept of nation if it is enough to speak of the population of the state? In this approach, the traditional and important dimensions of the

cultural concept of nation disappear. It raises important questions regarding the relation between the scientific use and the lay one. As has already been noted by Smith:

> Can we extrude all reference to 'culture' from the definition of a concept whose specificity resides exactly in the relationship it proposes between culture and politics? […] Precision and rigour should not be bought at the cost of excluding a concept's key elements and its differentiating characteristics. (Smith 1998:89)

How should we call what were thought to be nations? Cultural groups? Ethnic groups? From this perspective, we have not really found the meaning of 'nation', we have just assumed that there are no such things as nations, there are just populations living in states.

The constructivist approach

Constructivism is a very diverse movement that has been particularly important in sociology since the publication of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Since its publication, this work has been instrumental in research by showing that what were previously conceived as natural or social realities were in fact 'social constructions', i.e. they were the result of human actions and representations of the world and should not be considered as having a universal or natural existence. It has led to many famous and hotly contested debates on the nature of reality and our knowledge about it. Without entering into these philosophical debates, we can benefit from a form of analysis that places the focus on the mechanisms of the construction of social reality rather than taking its existence for granted.

A large part of the sociology of nationalism can be considered to be inspired by social constructivism, for its objective is often to evidence that nations have not been there forever and thus to challenge nationalists' view of nations as the natural grouping of humanity. The advantage of a constructivist approach is that it leads us to focus on the categories that are used to describe reality, rather than starting from the principle that the categories describe an actual reality. In ethnicity studies, Fredrik Barth's work is the most well-known foundation for an approach that proposes to focus on how categories create ethnic groups. He contends that categorical ethnic distinctions are based on processes of exclusion and incorporation 'whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories' (Barth 1998:10). He insists on the fact that ethnic groups do not depend on the interactions of their members but, on the contrary, that their interactions are based on categories:

> [W]e give primary emphasis to the fact that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people. (Barth 1998:10)

I call this approach 'constructivism', for it focuses on how a category is used and contributes to the transformation of social reality rather than seeking its true

meaning. This approach is close to subjectivism and Anderson's thesis of nations as imagined communities. Subjectivism, however, assumes that a nation exists because members of a nation imagine that they are part of the same group and it is this shared subjective belief that creates the group. Constructivism is more radical: it does not assume that nations are composed of people who have this shared feeling. It contests the existence of the group and proposes to focus only on the processes that involved this categorization, rather than on the characteristics of the group. For example, Craig Calhoun contends:

> The idea that nations give states clearly identifiable and meaningfully integrated populations […] is as problematic as it is influential. It is part of a discursive formation that structures the world, not simply an external description of it. (Calhoun 2007:147)

He does not thus assume that a nation is a group that considers itself a nation, but that it is a 'discursive formation that structures the world'. This interpretation leads us to focus more on the political and structural consequences of these 'discursive formations' than on the characteristics of 'nations' as groups. In this regard, Rogers Brubaker is certainly the sharpest critic today of the use of terms like 'ethnic group' or 'nation' to describe groups. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, Brubaker proposes to consider these concepts as categories of practice rather than analytical categories: they should not be considered as concepts that describe or explain social reality, but rather as concepts that are part of that reality and whose uses have to be explained (Brubaker 2004). As such, 'nation' does not refer to a social fact or an object, a group which has common characteristics, but only to a concept or a category that impacts on social reality.

Like eliminativism, Brubaker's constructivist approach avoids a large part of the problems encountered by objectivist and subjectivist definitions. Because it is impossible to find shared criteria among the diverse nations, it is better to adopt an approach that does not suppose that they exist. Moreover, focusing on processes avoids reifying groups and taking their reality for granted. There are two problems with this approach, however. The first one is that once we have said that the focus is on how a concept is used, we still have to explain this use and its particularity. Nationalists do not use the concept of nation in an arbitrary manner and all groups do not claim to be a nation. The object of investigation has changed: it is not a social group anymore; it is a category – but what makes this category distinct? Why would people use 'ethnic group' rather than 'nation', or vice versa? Answering this question leads once again to the need to define nation and, as with the subjectivist approach, we have come back almost to where we began.

The second problem with the constructivist approach is also highlighted by Brubaker: 'reification is a social process, not simply an intellectual bad habit' (2004:10). Brubaker argues that these categories have a performative character. If this is the case, it means that nationalists create the reality they believe in. It leads to an interesting question: if nations are not natural 'things in the world', were they created by those who believe in nations? Do they truly exist, though not as natural objects? The fact that nations can exist seems to follow from this

perspective. Brubaker proposes to treat nations as 'events', which means that nations can 'happen' even though they haven't always been there. Constructivists describe the numerous mechanisms that work to shape reality and contribute to making it correspond to the idea of nations: the exclusion of foreigners, forcing people to act in a certain manner, or to speak a particular language, etc.

How do we account not only for the fact that people think that nations exist, but also for the fact that they contribute to creating 'something' which, without conforming entirely to their idea, can have some of the characteristics of this idea? We can imagine that some processes of reification sometimes succeed, or at least that they succeed to a certain extent. This amounts to an assertion that even though nations do not exist as clearly demarcated groups, some groups more or less conform to some ideas of a nation. Brubaker considered groupness as a 'contextually fluctuating conceptual variable' (2004:11). Following this idea, we can also use the word 'nationness' as a variable which would measure how much a group is a nation, and whose meaning can change according to context.

Based on these ideas, we can distinguish a strong version of constructivism from a weak one. Strong constructivism would be a simple rejection of the idea that nations exist and a focus only on categories, or on what Brubaker calls the micropolitics of categories: how they are institutionalized and used. Weak constructivism, however, could assume that there is actually something that is created. It means that even though there are no nations as natural things in the world, there might be 'things' that look alike, since social interactions are nationalized. Some nationness is thus created by social and political processes. This approach rejects the binary choice between the 'object' and the 'imaginary group'. It means that even if nations do not really exist as clearly demarcated groups, their existence can be considered as a matter of degree.

Weak constructivism and the failure of nationalism

We have distinguished four different approaches in response to the question about the existence of nations. The first two assume that nations exist: objectivism does so by listing numerous criteria and subjectivism by assuming a shared feeling of belonging among the members of a nation. These approaches are easily subject to criticism based on Billig's remark that the world of nations is a hotchpotch of very different entities. The eliminativist approach provides a radical answer to this criticism, since by defining a nation as the population of a state, it empties the concept of its problematic elements. Constructivists propose to turn to processes and the effects of 'nation' as a category of practice, if we use the terminology of Brubaker and Bourdieu, or as a discursive formation if we use Calhoun's concept. However, if these processes are assumed to be powerful, then one can assume that they create a reality that is close to the category of 'nation'. This leads us to what we have called weak constructivism, which acknowledges that there is an end product to all these processes. Conceding this point risks leading us straight back to objectivism: why should we only focus on processes (categorization and policies) and not the end product (the nation)? It seems that we have come back to a form of objectivism which assumes that nations do exist; it is just

that now they have been created in the manner assumed by numerous modernist theories of nationalism.

The root of the problem is that if constructivism wants to avoid reifying social reality by focusing on categories and processes, it also needs to shed light on why and to what extent these processes fail – i.e. when they do not create social groups than can be called nations or only create them to a certain extent. Understanding the failure of nationalism is therefore the key to understanding the difficulties encountered by all of these approaches: why it is possible to assume strong processes of nation-building while at the same time considering that the empirical reality of 'nation' is questionable.

My objective is to ground this approach better in terms of nationalization and nationness. I shall therefore shed some light on the philosophical, psychological, and sociological reasons that support this weak constructivist approach. As previously emphasized, when asserting that 'nation' is simply a category, this says nothing about how the term is used or the difference between 'nation' and 'ethnic group'. The same is true with 'nationalization', since there has been no explanation of how this process occurs or the fact that it can be based on common categorization mechanisms as well as sociological ones.

Nationalization: Psychological, Sociological, and Historical Processes

Defining a concept and using it

In her book, *Community of Citizens* (1994), Dominique Schnapper writes that the 'idea of nation' has a meaning which (she assumes) exists despite the various uses of the concept. She adds that there is only one idea of nation and that an ethnic nation would be contradictory. This is largely at odds with social reality, where ethnic definitions of nations are common. More generally, political actors as well as philosophers give very different meanings to this concept. How can the social scientist decide what would be the right way to use the term 'nation'? To argue that there is only one meaning of nation that a careful analysis could bring to light leads to Platonism: the attempt to find the true meaning of a concept, as though this meaning were hidden in the realm of ideas.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy sets out to refute this approach. Instead of seeking the true meaning of a concept, he simply proposed to describe its various and different uses (1953). He argued that most of the time a word has many different uses which are only related to one another by a family resemblance. There is therefore not one common criterion that would be shared by all uses of the concept, but many resemblances. This simple but important idea seems to solve a large part of the problem. It supposes that it is pointless to try to find the real definition of 'nation' and that we should instead be interested in studying the diversity of uses of this concept. This perspective leads us to investigate what those uses are, and also to investigate whether this diversity of uses is nevertheless also underpinned by some common psychological mechanism of categorization.

The prototype of categorization

In this regard, an important theory in psychology is Eleanor Rosch's theory of prototype, which has been influenced by Wittgenstein's ideas. According to Rosch (1999), membership in a category is not granted by satisfying a list of distinct and necessary criteria, but by distance from a prototype which represents the central tendency of the category. For example, there is no criterion which would be shared by all birds, but all birds look like each other. One important consequence is that there are also typical examples of a category, like a sparrow, and a member of the category can be more or less distant from this typical example. An ostrich is, on the contrary, a far from typical bird. There are therefore no clear boundaries which would separate the insider from the outsider. This model has had great success in psychology (Pothos and Wills 2011).

Rosch's theory highlights important aspects of categories: their multidimensionality, their polysemy, and the vagueness of their boundaries. Objective definitions of nation are clearly underpinned by such prototypical mechanisms of categorization: they are based on various criteria (phenotypical characteristics, cultural practices, religion, etc.) which are thought to be typical of the country, certainly because they are in fact frequent in the country. Even though theorists would want to distinguish cultural, social, or biological criteria, these are not very well distinguished in ordinary representations. Mixtures of ethnic and political criteria can easily be found in all representations of nation or in the representation of what is 'a French person', 'an American', 'an Indian', or 'a Chinese person'. This explains a constant outcome in the literature: the fact that there is no sharp opposition between an ethnic and a civic conception of nation (Brubaker 2004; Calhoun 2007), for both types of criteria are frequently used together.

The importance of the prototypical model of categorization to account for how ordinary people use the concept of nation shows that this concept does not differ from common ways of categorizing, contrary to what was 'obvious' to the great historian Hobsbawm, who wrote that it was not easy to define nation, as opposed to a bird or a lizard (1990:5). Because he did not question language and its difficult relation with reality, Hobsbawm did not see that the problem is not specific to the concept of 'nation': it is a common problem for all concepts. In fact, 'nation' is *not* the most puzzling concept of the political lexicon, contrary to Tilly's assertion (1975). There is indeed something obscure about the idea, but no more than is found throughout our ordinary use of language.

Even though Rosch refers to Wittgenstein, there are important differences between her model of categorization that emphasizes a common mechanism and his idea of family resemblance underpinning the diversity of the uses of a word instead of one common shared criterion. Through a common categorization mechanism, Rosch reintroduced a strong unity to the use of one concept. This still leaves space, however, for considering other important questions, such as: how are those prototypes constructed? How many are there? How do various social and political organizations influence their construction? Answering these questions requires going beyond a psychological approach in terms of categorization mechanisms so as to analyse the relation of a concept to the organization of social life.

Language and forms of life

Once again, we can make use of a fundamental idea from Wittgenstein – namely, the concept of forms of life – in order to go beyond an analysis that sees only 'nation' as a category. In a famous citation, Wittgenstein contended that 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life' (1953, no.19). Wittgenstein seeks to go beyond a psychological conception of meaning, for which the meaning of a world would only be in our head, to focus on the complex relations between language and social life. He also expressed this idea by writing that if a lion could speak, we would not understand it. If the meaning of our words comes from our social life, this also means that they cannot be easily translated into another language, for this language would need to be able to describe the same kind of social life. Understanding the concept of nation requires thus not only to understand a cognitive mechanism, but also a form of life or, in more sociological terms, to understand how this concept is used in a particular organization of social life.

The fact that the concept of nation cannot be considered without the social life in which it is developed was already clearly identified by the approach I called eliminativist, according to which we cannot speak of a nation without speaking of a state. Ernest Gellner gave a very clear and interesting definition of nationalism that clearly points to this relation: he defined nationalism as the political theory according to which the cultural unit (the nation) should correspond to the political unit (the state) (1983). The idea that there should be a congruence between national and political units is a modern phenomenon. As Breuilly emphasized, in our understanding of medieval Europe the cultural and political spheres are conceived as independent: 'the monarch has no national task' (Breuilly 1993:4). According to Calhoun, nationalism was the most important 'part of the consensus forged in the late nineteenth century as to what would count as politically appropriate identities' (1999:226). Understanding the concept of 'nation' therefore requires us not only to find a hidden meaning, but also to explain its use in a social and historical process. That is, the construction of the state.

Nation, nationalism, and the state

The relation between the construction of the state and the nation-state has been extensively described by the work of Michael Mann, which builds a general argument to explain the emergence of nation-states. He contends that a nation-state is the outcome of the centralization and unification of a territory under the influence of a growing state. He argues that the 'increase in state infrastructural powers also increases the territorial boundedness of social interaction' (1984:134). This 'territorial boundedness' makes it more natural to think of the population of a state as unified and constituting a 'people', thus, as he wrote, 'civil society was "naturalized" into nation-states' (Mann 1986:504). It is therefore 'the infrastructural state' that 'nourished the nation-state' (*ibid.*:489).

According to Mann, this change is one of the great modernizing transformations. Indeed, Hobsbawm reminds us that it was not really important for the citizen of an empire or a realm to know from which nation he was (1990). This was also because he belonged to a state whose infrastructural power at that time

was much weaker and had not unified its territory. For France, Eugen Weber in his famous book *Peasants into French Men* (1976) showed how the nation was built through the centralization of territory by the development of unified systems of education and conscription, but also by the development of transport infrastructures. Partitioning the social world into distinct nations which correspond to particular states is therefore not the result of the development of a political theory arising out of thin air. It is much more the outcome of the increasing autonomy of the state and the unification of its territory.

The idea of 'nation' or of the unity of a population under the control of a state is therefore the result of a sociological and historical process by which territories have been clearly bounded, making it more natural to account for the unity of a people living in a well-defined and delimited territory. This explanation brings with it its own puzzle, however. If the nation is merely the outcome of the centralization of the state, why did it seem difficult to define it in the first place? Why should we follow Brubaker and be interested in nationness as a variable instead of nations as bounded groups, especially if the border of the groups can be explained by the infrastructural power of the state? I shall argue that to fully understand this puzzle and to reconcile these two results we need to examine an idea defended by Gellner and often overlooked: the idea of the weakness of nationalism.

Nationalization and the Weakness of Nationalism

Sociologists of nationalism often emphasize the strength of the concept. Benedict Anderson wrote that nationalism is the most legitimate idea of our time (2006). One common argument which provides evidence of its strength is that people would be ready to die for their nation. This is the argument offered by Smith[1] and Calhoun[2] against state-centred approaches. According to Smith and Calhoun, the approaches examined above cannot explain the passion stirred by nationalism. However, as underlined by Hobsbawm, the readiness to die is hardly proof of the strength of nationalism. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand why many mercenaries also fought in the two World Wars as well as other armies that did not belong to a nation-state.[3] It is not clear that these fighters fought less bravely than men fighting for a nation-state they identified with. More important for our subject than the question of the readiness to die, therefore, is the question of political legitimacy and political borders. Is nationalism so strong that only nation-states would be legitimate states? I shall argue that, on the contrary, nationalism is weak, and that taking this weakness into account helps us to understand the puzzle of the nation.

The diversity of nation-states and nationalisms

As already stated, Gellner defines nationalism as the political theory according to which the cultural unit should correspond to the political unit. At the same time, he notes that this political theory does not describe the map of the states and he contends that nationalism is weak. His argument is to point out that there are many more nations than nation-states. If we consider

language as a measure of cultural unity and thus the basis for a nation, Gellner remarks that there are several thousand spoken languages, but only around two hundred nation-states. Therefore, most potential nations do not demand to have their own state, or have not succeeded in having it come into being. The world of states therefore seems much more complex than the nationalist ideology according to which one state should correspond to each nation. The puzzle of the concept of nation therefore comes from the contradiction between the strength of the assumption that members of the same state should have some commonality and the fact that the map of the world does not correspond to this assumption.

I shall argue that the various meanings of the concept of nation come from the various possible ways in which it is possible to account retrospectively for the unity of a population which is necessarily diverse, having been gathered together by military conflicts (Tilly 1975). The classical opposition of the ethnic/civic dichotomy, cultural nationalism or republicanism are different attempts to account for this unity that has to be built retrospectively. For example, cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 2013) describes a population whose unity scholars endeavour to define through several criteria such as cultural practices, national identity, feelings of belonging, historical continuity, common myths or languages. However, there is an infinite number of possibilities to account for the unity of a population such as skin, eyes or hair colour, height, weight, common language, feeling of belonging, religion, etc. Moreover, someone who endeavours to explain India's unity will need to use different kinds of arguments than if attempting to explain Iceland's unity. Although definitions based on prototypical categorizations are commonly used to identify populations, in political debates there are many other methods available which can be based on the country's history or other political doctrines like republicanism (Benner 2013). The conflict between France and Germany exacerbated the opposition between civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation, for example. The history of the United States inspired the theme of the 'nation of immigrants'. Each history can thus provide a different way to imagine the unity of the population and to distinguish it from its neighbours.

The literature on 'nation-building' illustrates that states have often attempted to achieve unity between the national and political unit through violent means (Kamusella 2012). However, the fact that it seems so difficult to speak about the existence of nations demonstrates that these processes of 'nation-building' often failed, or that they only succeeded to a certain extent. Even though numerous states have attempted to achieve this unity, the political map is still full of discrepancies, and it is hard to find a political unit which represents a real or perfect unity, whatever the criteria we use to define this unity. This argument brings us back to Brubaker's idea of nationalization and nationness. Nationalism and nation-building clearly contribute to the construction of nations; social reality has often been built according to the idea of nation. However, this process often succeeded only to a certain extent, which means that it did not succeed in creating nations as real and clearly demarcated groups, but only nationalized societies to a certain degree.

The complex construction of social reality

There is in our language a large repertoire of symbols, traditions, and ideas that are associated with nations and which contribute to framing social interactions. They can contribute to how we think of political conflicts and also to different national ways of eating, playing football, or treating members of different countries. However, as I have noted, political units do not neatly correspond to national units. As important as nationalism is, there are many other ideas and ideologies that contribute to the construction of social reality. Nationalism is therefore only one of them. A simple and seemingly obvious idea expressed by Wittgenstein is particularly illuminating to understand the complexity of this process:

> Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (Wittgenstein 1953, no.18)

Wittgenstein insists thereby on the complexity of language, the fact that it inherits from different histories, different traditions, and does not form a coherent whole or an integrated system. We can think of society using the same model. Nationalism is only one of the numerous ways that we organize social life. Society is like a city made of multiple architectural styles belonging to different periods of time or social groups. Therefore, there are many aspects of our social life that are organized by nationalism, but there are also many other principles that intervene. Referring to nation or cultural community is only one way of organizing social interactions and it is the main reason why there is no clear correspondence between state and nation. Legal theory, economic theories, political theories, socialism, conservatism, religion; all of these concepts and ideas contribute to the construction of social reality. Nationalism is thus like an architectural style in a city: it is used to build some buildings or even some districts, but it does not make the entire city. It is used more in some 'boroughs' and less in others, it has been destroyed in some places and reconstructed elsewhere.

Hence, using the category of nation is only one manner of building social reality. Social reality is not a simple reflection of our language categories, for there are many different and opposing principles which contribute to the construction of social reality: various conflicts, negotiations, and other world images, for example. Therefore, there is no one object which is a 'nation', because the social reality that is constructed is much more complex than that. Wittgenstein's approach combined with classical social constructivism leads us to a simple observation: there is no nation which exists as an object in the world because the contribution of multiple and diverse actors to the construction of social reality leads to a much messier social reality than the one which is described by our categories or political philosophies. Some 'parts' of society are built according to nationalist principles – the correspondence between the political unit and the cultural one – but not the whole society and not to a sufficient extent to conclude that nations really exist. The idea of nation has spread through social reality but without being entirely modelled by it.

Consensus, conflict, and unintended effects

People act in accordance with the image they have of society and they contribute to creating the reality they believe in, making the world correspond to this image. In the case of the nation and many mechanisms within the social sciences, the process of social construction is much more permanent than the usual examples of a self-fulfilling prophecy, such as the collapse of a bank. Because people believe in the existence of a nation, they create a social reality which looks like the idea of the nation by maintaining and reproducing cultural specificities, but also by excluding foreigners or foreign practices. Thus 'representations' or 'images' of nations shape social relations and contribute to the construction of social reality. Social reality is also the outcome of a struggle to impose certain representations of social reality (Bourdieu 2000).

These representations are incorporated as spontaneous and unquestioned ways of representing social reality. From this perspective we can describe nationalist philosophy not as a theory that one would accept after an exchange of arguments, but rather as a spontaneous way of perceiving the social order that people incorporate. Partitioning the world into separate nations and thinking that one state has to correspond to one nation is also a way of seeing the world that individuals learn by a progressive and imperceptible process of socialization. People become familiar with nationalist principles and they take them for granted. These principles become 'banal' in Billig's famous expression of 'banal nationalism' (1995). This process is also a central element in the reproduction of social order, for this spontaneous way of partitioning the world is thus perceived as natural and therefore legitimate.

People can struggle to impose some particular organization of social reality, and those involved in nation-building will likely have competing ideas about the particular order or form of organization they seek to impose. Nonetheless, the social reality often differs from that which was intended by its 'builders'. Some social actors certainly intend to mould society according to nationalist principles, to make the political unit correspond to the cultural one. However, society is also created through the unintended consequences of these various attempts to build it according to different world images. Methodological individualism has shown that the aggregation of actions often leads to unpredictable outcomes (Boudon 2009). Many social actors attempt to build nations, but in such a social construction, success is always a matter of degree. This explains through a sociological perspective one of our previous conclusions: it is not the whole society which is more or less a nation, but only parts of it which are more or less constructed according to nationalist ideas and thus are more or less nationalized. Policies around the welfare state or immigration, for example, often follow nationalist principles, notably when they only give rights to national citizens. They are nevertheless also built on other principles and philosophies. Hence the social reality results from a fragile compromise between the confrontation of different principles.

This provides an answer to one of our key problems: why do nations seem to be so important but are nowhere to be seen? There is no nation as an actual object in the world because social reality is not the simple product of a political philosophy or of one 'idea'. Even though some political or social actors struggle to make the world

correspond to their ideas, there are also many other forces that come into play. State governments have no intention of losing part of their power by letting one part of their territory become autonomous simply because it claims to constitute a different cultural unit. The state reinforces the boundaries of society but also in ways and for reasons which often have nothing to do with the construction of a nation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined how some of the classical sociologists or historians of nations and nationalisms have attempted to define the concept of the nation and how they have dealt with their contested empirical reality. I pointed out the short-comings of these different approaches and argued that the best approach was that offered by Brubaker, who proposed to focus on nationalization and groupness rather than on 'the nation'. I applied this idea of 'groupness' to nation with the notion of 'nationness' and I attempted to expand on this idea by describing some important mechanisms which underpin this process: prototypical categorizations, nationalism, and the construction of the nation-state.

I also argued that this approach, which only proposes to focus on processes, should find some common principles that are shared between the uses of the con-cept of nation so as to explain the diversity of those uses. I have assumed that the concept of nation is foremost an attempt to explain and legitimize the unity of the population living under a state – a state whose borders are ultimately arbitrary. Therefore, the concept of nation can be used in various ways to establish the unity of the people and to distinguish the nation from its neighbours. It depends on common mechanisms of categorization, but also on the history and specificity of each state. In each state, based on its history, scholars and intellectuals can in-vent different narratives to explain the unity of its population or, on the contrary, to celebrate its diversity. These narratives, which explain why a particular popula-tion is under the power of the same state, can have an important impact on this population, contributing to its sense of unity. This idea of nation is a double-edged sword, however, especially in a context in which most states are multicultural. It can be used against a state when some parts of its population consider themselves as very different from the rest of the population. These minorities can turn against their state and claim their autonomy to create a 'real nation-state'.

Finally, I proposed that Gellner's thesis of the weakness of nationalism is an im-portant explanation to the puzzle of the existence of nations. Insisting on the weakness of nationalism and on the complexity of the construction of society ex-plains what we could call a constructivist paradox: to assume that the processes of nation-building are powerful while questioning the existence of nations. National-ism is only one manner among many others through which the state legitimizes its power and according to which the social reality is built. This explains why the reality of the existence of a 'nation' is a matter of degree and specific to each nation-state. In each nation-state, not only will the attempt to build the nation obey different principles and follow from different narratives, but it will also only succeed to a certain degree, depending on the specific conditions of the state. The social reality is always different from what its builders intended to create.

This provides a simple solution to the paradox that we have observed right from the beginning. Nations do not really exist in the way nationalists would like them to exist. However, some parts of the reality are indeed nationalized, in the sense that those specific parts have been shaped close to a certain ideal or definition of nation. The growing infrastructural power of states has allowed for the construction of societies. Nationalism has certainly played an important role in this process, but so too have democracy, republicanism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, etc. All these ideologies have contributed to the construction of societies which – as with Frankenstein's monster – then went on to escape their creators.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] 'Hence, explanations in terms of inter-state relations and warfare fail to uncover the emotional sources of national sentiment' (Smith 1998:83).

[2] 'The state-centred approach, in sum, clarifies one dimension of nationalism but obscures others. In particular, it makes it hard to understand why national identity can stir the passions it does' (Calhoun 1993:219).

[3] 'Suppose, for instance, we take the readiness to die for the fatherland as an index of patriotism, as seems plausible enough and as nationalists and national governments have naturally been inclined to do. We would then expect to find William II's and Hitler's soldiers, who were presumably more open to the national appeal, fought more bravely than the eighteenth-century Hessians, hired out as mercenaries by their prince, who presumably were not so motivated. But did they? And did they fight better than, say, the Turks in World War I, who can hardly yet be regarded as national patriots? Or the Gurkhas who, fairly evidently, have not been motivated by either British or Nepalese patriotism?' (Hobsbawm 1990:79).

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