

Introduction: the nation in social science and history

This book deals with the national identity of the Germans. As a consequence of German unification, and in the midst of a renaissance of national movements in eastern and central Europe, the issue has gained a currency that sophisticated academic research often finds suspect. The present study establishes a necessary distance from the simply current – not merely because it arrives at the present only after a journey through the past, but also, and primarily, because the origins of national identity are reconstructed here within an explicit theoretical framework. This sort of theoretical framework may seem rather elaborate for historical material – and those uncomfortable with theory should proceed directly to chapter 2 – but it provides the possibility of comparison, and places the rise of German identity in the context of general problems of Modernity. Our examination therefore begins with an overview of various scholarly perspectives on the issue of “nation” as such; and the following chapter constitutes a general theoretical essay on the construction of collective identity.

1) In the nineteenth century, Europe discovered the nation as the foundation of political sovereignty, social organization, and historical orientation.¹ The nation came to be considered the paramount “collective subject” of history, not only in projections of “future history,” but just as much in the reconstruction of the historical past. Other forces – dynastic interests, individual ambition, and the struggle among denominations – had, in this view, been able to prevent, for a very long time, the discovery of the nation and its achievement of self-consciousness. But the transition from a sort of somnolent existence to the actions of a self-aware nation seemed inevitable. Similar to the way in which an individual subject undergoes a process of maturation before achieving self-determination and self-sufficient action,

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nations were also destined, over the course of history, to achieve the realization and determination of their identity. The Hegelian background of this model of history can hardly be ignored, especially as expressed in writings of German historians. The identity of the nation became the reference point for political action and economic interest, for cultural reflexion and pedagogic effort. The nation–state represented a reconciliation of territorial statehood with the necessity of democratic legitimation in a fashion that no longer required individual assent to authority. Because the people as a whole were sovereign, they no longer needed to safeguard in detail a presumed conjunction of power with the will of the people. A middle level between regional markets and the all-encompassing relations of the world market was discovered in the national economy, where the tension between universal economic rationality and particular communal relationships could be moderated, while the legal framework for economic action could at the same time be secured by the state.

This conception, originating in western Europe and embodied in the French Revolution, of the nation as the “normal form” in history and society, was furthermore the defining force in an important tradition of the scholarly analysis of nations: a tradition stretching from early national historical writing in France and Germany, from Treitschke, Maurras and Barrès, to the modernization theory prevalent in the years after the Second World War.² The current sprang from an emphatically charged historical metaphysics, impervious to any empirical–historical examination, wherein the nation poses the categorical frame, within which *its history* can take place as the object of research, but is itself no longer the object of any critical or empirical gaze.

This changed especially with respect to those states of the Third World that became politically independent in the 1960s within borders that had been imposed by foreign interests and the administrative imperatives of colonial powers. “Nation-building” thus became a practical political project, as well as a central research theme of the social sciences.³ Although the western European nation–state continued serving as the barely questioned “ideal form,” a switch in the direction of view and a metamorphosis of attitude was thus completed. While in western Europe the development of national consciousness ran largely parallel to the constitution of national states, and while in central and eastern Europe political history reacted to an already existing, ethnocultural national consciousness, most of the new Third World states were already constituted as “nation”–states *before* a national consciousness could arise beyond the limits of a narrow, European-educated elite. Instead of being nations without states, these were states without nations.⁴ The state-carrying elites

of Africa and Asia had pursued their struggles for independence with a rhetoric of anticolonial liberation. This rhetoric became even more indispensable after decolonization, however, especially where no other fundamentalist ideologies could be found to replace it.⁵ And faced with a choice between socialism and nationalism, the development politics of the West preferred to support efforts toward a national substantiation of the new states. Thus the nation became a political project to be described, advised upon, and programmatically realized with the help of sociology, pedagogy, and political science.

The failure of the attempt to weld together tribal groups evincing extreme ethnic and cultural heterogeneity into nations that could hold together even after the deaths of their charismatic founding figures finally led to a more differentiated view. The explicitly supported, practically approached process of “nation-building” was now supplanted by an empirical and historically sophisticated analysis of “nation-becoming.” Certainly the western European model continued to serve as the authoritative starting point for diffusionist or comparative perspectives.⁶ But analyses finally began to acknowledge the differences in the historical and sociostructural initial conditions confronting nations-to-be, or in the cultural and institutional backgrounds. History was no longer explained as the result of national emancipation. Instead, nations were explained as the result of history. Starting as a metahistorical, referential frame of analysis, nations thus first became the project of political practice before they were finally treated as the object of historical description and analysis.

2) In contrast to the emphatically charged conception of the “nation” traceable back to German Idealism,⁷ the Enlightenment also bestowed a critical perspective on the national, running back to Kant and his idea of “world peace between all reasonable subjects”: neither wars between peoples, nor the particularities of national interest, can be rationalized or justified within the framework of a universally applicable and transcendently substantiated reason and morality. From this universalist perspective history does not appear as the gradual awakening of nations, but as the fading away of national, religious, and feudal-rank differences with respect to a Modernity that overwhelms all borders.⁸ Religion is overcome by enlightenment and science; the ruling classes by revolution and democracy; and, finally, borders between nations are overcome and replaced by world peace and the solidarity of mankind.

Although it never disappeared entirely, this antinational Modernism played a limited, peripheral role in the historical scholarship of the nineteenth century. That changed radically, however, as the national emphasis

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perished in the inferno of the two World Wars of the twentieth century. Especially after the Holocaust and the devastation of Europe through the Second World War, the orientation of politics and history around national interest appeared to be the original sin of Modernity, bound to lead inevitably to history's catastrophic collapse.

The salvation story of national self-discovery thus turned into the pre-history of an exemplary fall from grace, by which postnational politics and historical scholarship were to reorient themselves. The idea of national self-determination was supplanted by that of the nationalist seduction. National identity is thus rediscovered as the transitory result of political construction and propaganda and the role of political and intellectual seducers is brought to the fore. The view of nationalism as the demon of Modernity corresponded to a political praxis that had set out to tame and overcome that demon through enlightenment and education.

But any attempt to reconstruct the intellectual prehistory, especially that of German nationalism, is quickly forced to make distinctions. There is no simple path leading from Luther and Herder to Fichte and Nietzsche, and the connection between them and the racism of Chamberlain or Rosenberg is also by no means unambiguous.⁹ A differentiation between "good" nationalism and "bad" nationalism is thus ultimately found necessary; patriotism is contrasted to national chauvinism; and in the end even the automatic connection between nationalism, and fascism or Nazism, is undone.¹⁰ Thus critical research into nations also underwent a reversal of perspective. The variety of national paths to Modernity was discovered, and comparative explanations took the place of moral political verdicts.

3) This sort of comparative research on nations can also be traced back to an eighteenth-century debate. An empirical/descriptive view of national differences had already arisen in Enlightenment Europe, following the reception of Montesquieu's work, focusing not only upon the differences among nations in political institutions, but also differences in everyday behavior between the English and Italians, French and Germans. The characters of peoples, their virtues and qualities, were encyclopedically summarized, and associated with climate and geography. However, this comparative, empirical view of national differences could hardly have held up well, or come to the fore, in the nineteenth century. Only in the comparative research into nations of recent decades did it once again become the defining perspective.

One comparative approach to the research on nations begins by concentrating on the asynchrony with which historical processes reached fruition in each region. The lack of simultaneity among regions on their way into

Modernity is thus raised to a shaping principle of national identity. Pathbreaking nations face latecomers. The interaction between them lastingly defines the formation of each of their national identities.¹¹ England and France had superiority and a head start in both unification of the territorial state and economic development. This blocked the way, for the “latecomer nations” of eastern and central Europe, to a *political–statist* or economic identification of national particularity.¹²

Much like the twentieth-century newcomer nations of Africa, the late arrivals of Europe had to substantiate their national identity in other areas, using other ideas. Often this involved the idea of *moral* superiority, such as that of the vassal emancipating himself from the oppression of his lord, or of the unspoiled, modest, and “pure” commoners faced with the corrupt and depraved royal court.¹³ Most of all, however, peculiarities and distinctions of *culture and language* could serve as substantiations for national identity. From Herder and German Romanticism, this conception can be followed right up to Meinecke’s famous distinction between the “state nation” and the “cultural nation,” upon which the present work is also based.¹⁴

Not only will differences between various societies serve herein as our axis of comparison; the asynchrony of development among *various spheres within* society will also be pivotal. In the western European nations, the territorial state formed the borders of a nation that in itself was not yet by any means culturally homogeneous. The contrasts between *Langue d’oc* and *Langue d’oil* within France, for example, or the divide between Catholic Scots and Reformed English within Britain, were moderated and defused only long after the territorial unification of the state was completed. Conversely, Poles, Germans, Italians and Czechs possessed a common language and literature that crossed over the borders of the principalities, long before their consolidation into nation–states.

A further distinction relates to the historical period within which a culturally grounded national consciousness arises. While the old nation–states of western Europe – much like the Dutch, Swedes, Poles, Russians, and Germans – all possessed such a national consciousness before the nineteenth century, i.e. before the “Age of Nationalism” in a narrower sense, the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs and new nations of Asia and Africa only developed their national consciousness within the context of a globally available idea of national independence.¹⁵ But the new nations of Africa, Arabia, and South Asia had only a limited cultural foundation to fall back upon. In substantiating their national identity, they were at first far more dependent upon formal territorial borders and the administrative apparatus left behind by the colonial powers. Alongside the “*state nations*”

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of western and northern Europe and the “*cultural nations*” of central and eastern Europe, there arose in 1960 the new “*territorial nations*” of Africa, which, much like the United States of America, do not possess a homogeneous ethnic and cultural foundation.

More precise observation shows, however, that ethnocultural homogeneity is also the rare exception among European nations. Within each nation–state, there is usually a distinction between a state-carrying majority nation, and only partly integrated national and/or ethnic minorities, such as the Basques and Catalans in Spain, Welsh and Irish in Great Britain, Bretons and Alsatians in France. In addition, there are the new ethnocultural minorities that arise through immigration: Pakistanis and West Indians in Great Britain, North Africans in France, Turks in Germany.

This brings up the relation between the *carrier groups* of national identity and groups on the periphery of a society. The tension and dependence between the ruling elites and the economic center on the one side, and peripheral groups on the other, has been researched primarily within the Marxist tradition.¹⁶ According to that view, the dominance of a metropolis over the determination of national identity calls forth aspirations for cultural autonomy as a countering action among peripheral groups. The effort of these “internal colonies”¹⁷ to achieve autonomy and equal status with respect to the metropolitan culture leads to the reconstruction of a “submerged” past, aiming at “national rebirth.”

National consciousness as a reaction to the political, economic, and cultural dominance of a metropolis is admittedly not just a European phenomenon, with the Irish or Corsicans for example, but in fact provides the key to explaining the independence movements of Africa and Asia, or the ethnic movements of North America. But a further sociostructural distinction, one that Marxist theorists too gladly overlook, must also be made. It is usually not the impoverished and oppressed masses on the periphery who emerge as the carriers of national identity, but rather the *elites* within peripheral sectors and classes. Although excluded from metropolitan and hegemonic culture, by no means do they represent the lowest end of social stratification. Here traditional, patrimonial, and feudal elites must be considered along with the economically ambitious bourgeois of early Modernity, administrative and civil servants, or declassed intellectuals. It is far less an absolute situation on the periphery than the *status inconsistencies*, such as those between a group’s traditional honor and its meager economic power, or conversely between its high wealth and its low political privilege, that set off the search for cultural autonomy and national identity among the disappointed and excluded.

Nonetheless, such excluded and disappointed elites on the periphery, or

middle classes just outside the gates of power, require the support of the *masses* if they are to mount any kind of serious challenge to the metropolis, and deny its claim as voice of the encompassing collectivity – of the *Allgemeinheit*, the general trope, “the people.” Attempts to create this manner of alliance between peripheral elites and the mass of the people favor a *populist* and romantic idea of national identity, one that falls back upon traditional symbols and everyday myths. In the articulation and literary substantiation of these national myths, *the intellectuals* within peripheral groups take on a special significance. They may be in command of the education of the hegemonic culture, but they are excluded from access to political power, from a share in the wealth of the metropolis, and from entry to the respectable, hegemonic elites. Out of this dissonance – between (high) culture and education on the one side, and (low) social prestige and political power on the other, there arises a self-evident compulsion to radically redefine the relation between periphery and center, and to attribute to the periphery an autonomous, original, and indeed superior culture, even while viewing the center as commanding power and wealth only through historical coincidence, and as projecting its hegemonic cultural claims without substantiation.

4) All of the considerations on “nation-becoming” sketched up to this point are located within the framework of conflict theory. Within that paradigm, collective identity and the ability to act, *agency*, are explained as arising from the unequal relationship between several *sociostructural* groups. These groups already exist – as intellectuals, middle classes, or peripheral elites – and they enrich or redefine their existence by acquiring national consciousness. This does not yet bring up the question of *why*, and through what processes, rituals, or mechanisms, the members of a group discover their commonalities, and set themselves off against third parties.

This kind of question primarily addresses the particular *institutions* that create the framework for communication, and limit or extend the range of communication. Seen from this perspective, social groups, ranks, or classes are not simply and naturally “there”; nor are they generated just by material conditions. Instead they *produce* and reproduce themselves through particular forms of *communication* – through the familiar discussion among equals that excludes “outsiders” and generates social differences as the boundaries defining familiarity and community.

The reproduction of a social group, rank, or class enters into crisis when relations of communication start to cross the boundaries of the group more than just occasionally, and do so with increasing frequency. The expansion of transportation routes and the increased density of communication

networks at the dawn of the modern period, for example, resulted in increasingly frequent encounters with strangers. Once such a process is under way, it becomes increasingly rare that an elementary degree of trust in a partner, which is indispensable to interactions of trade, administration, power, or law, can be produced and assured merely by pointing out the same regional origin or membership in the same class. Interregional forms of integration, crossing class borders, must therefore be found, anchored in social consciousness through specific markings, and reinforced in daily activity through specific rituals. This sort of everyday form of integration, linking diverse regional and class communities, can very effectively be created through the idea of a nation.¹⁸

But it is not only the expansion of trade routes, a higher density of communications, urbanization, and a growing degree of participation in decisions within the metropolis that necessitate new foundations for community and integration. A decisive role is played by the growth in *mobility* between various social groups. If social and regional origins no longer set final limits on an individual's career or life story – offer no steady expectations; if an individual's identity is in flux, and must be determined by the individual in the course of a difficult process, then a compensatory general search for a *comprehensive community*, within which an individual can feel protected from the changing tides of modern life, becomes all the more likely.

In the process of modernization, the weakening of traditional ties and the growth of regional and horizontal mobility go hand in hand with a comprehensive process of *functional differentiation*. The diversity of particular societal sectors increases, with the individual put into an ever-more complicated network of division of labor, within which he or she has little in common with others. To counteract the alienating and disruptive effects of differentiation, particular and new forms of integration and inclusion become necessary. The nation thus forms the integrative basis for the differentiation process of modern societies.

This explanation of how nations come into being, as a result of modernization, of the intensification of communications, and of increased vertical and horizontal mobility, usually stresses the significance of *systems of education and upbringing*.¹⁹ These are not only switchboards or selection procedures governing individual career paths, but also institutional platforms upon which the obligation of the individual to a particular encompassing identity, to the prince or nation, is established.

5) The building of a general system of upbringing and education is closely bound by the borders of a language – at the same time demanding the

standardization of that language, and dissemination of its literary traditions.²⁰ On this level, of shared literary traditions, of hero and origin myths, or of symbolic markings through emblems, flags, and colors, there sprout the *culturalist perspectives* of the nation. Seen this way, belonging to a nation is neither a natural fact nor a side effect of modernization. Instead it is substantiated through participation in a common symbolic culture that is both unique and inalienable, in the view of its adherents.²¹ Here the rise of nations occurs through the symbolic distinguishing of a national culture, of a high literature and a classical period in the history of literature, music, and art. And here as well, in the cultural/symbolic reconstruction of national identity and history, intellectuals – literati, philosophers, historians – again take a central position. Especially wherever the nation is not yet constituted in any form as a state, intellectuals frequently become the high priests of a secularized, national ersatz religion, heralding the ultimate reconciliation of culture and politics, of state and nation, of rulers and ruled. These millenarian and chiliastic elements of nationalism can build upon Christian traditions, and serve to ease the transition from the reconstruction of a mythical past to historical action and political movement.²²

Let us summarize. Various perspectives can serve to guide the comparative approach to nations adopted in recent decades by research in the social and historical sciences. One of these perspectives begins from the particular position of a structural group or a people, and explains the becoming of a nation through the particular situation of a defined collective, in relation to other groups, peoples, or nations. Here the nation appears as the result of efforts to substantiate, understand, and enrich one's own situation with respect to others. This perspective could be called *sociostructural* or a sociology of knowledge.

A second perspective does not consider groups, classes, or peoples who already exist in history and are struggling toward a self-awareness, but sees the nation as an *integrative countermovement* to processes of modernization, individualization, mobilization, and differentiation. In the course of these processes, traditional forms of collective identity break down, and are replaced by new patterns. Accordingly it is not the previous existence of a collective actor that leads to collective actions understood as expressions of such a real, previously existing actor. Instead, it is only through the process of collective action, through the expansion of social networks to meet the requirements of modern institutions, that national identity is created in the first place. The direction of view is thus reversed: process explains structure. Action constitutes the actor, and not vice versa.

A third perspective begins neither with the actor, nor with the determining processes of interaction, but with the pictures, ideas and myths contained in the *cultural traditions* available for use in the construction of national identity. Such a culturalist perspective has until now remained theoretically underdeveloped, and largely limited to a reconstruction of national myths and traditions. A general logic by which cultural construction of a national identity, of a mythology of the collective in a narrower sense, might operate, has not yet been proposed. The following chapter attempts to fill this vacuum, and presents a general model of construction of collective identity. This model places the cultural codes by which collective identity is constructed at center stage; but it does so without downplaying the weight of the sociostructural situation of particular carrier groups, or the significance of communications and interaction processes in the genesis of national identity. Instead, cultural code, communicative process, and sociostructural situation are linked together in a general model that does not treat them merely as some isolated “important explanatory factors,” but sheds light on their internal functional relations.²³

After establishing this general model, the main part of the book then examines the development of the national identity of the Germans between the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century and the founding of the Wilhelmine Empire in 1871.²⁴ According to this thesis, the cultural identity of the Germans, carried by the educated bourgeoisie – the *Bildungsbürger* – and formulated by certain groups of intellectuals, arose within this timespan of a “long” century. The structure of this cultural national identity is reconstructed in four scenarios, each determined by a particular form of intellectual discourse: that of the Enlightenment, of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism, of the *Vormärz* (the “pre-March” period, as it was later called, between the Restoration of 1815 and the Revolution of March, 1848), and of the *Reichsgründung*, the “foundation of empire.” Out of these discourses, as I shall argue here, there arose a repertoire of various codes for the national identity of the Germans, a repertoire which then remained available, to be called upon in later periods. This was especially true in the time between 1945 and 1990, during which, as in the century between 1770 and 1870, the national identity of the Germans was not substantiated in a political, single-state unity. A longer epilogue is therefore devoted to these four decades between the Second World War and German unification.