1 Introduction

> Emperor Frederick III: 'The Empire and the honour of Germany are so dear to me that I would spare no effort or expense. But … we have to unite the forces of our nation; we have to make of all of us one single body.'
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> Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *Pentalogus*, 1443

> The English is the enemy of the French, for no other reason than he is French. The Scot is the enemy of the British (*Britannus*), for no other reason than he is Scottish. The German is at enmity with the French, the Spanish with both. … Are we taking the common word 'fatherland' for such a grave cause that one people seeks to annihilate the other?
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> Desiderius Erasmus, *A Complaint of Peace*, 1517

This book offers a new understanding of the historical origins of nationalism, combined with an explanation of the initial formation of European nations. It challenges the currently dominant view among historians and sociologists that nationalism is to be seen as a uniquely modern phenomenon established by industrialisation and mass communication in the nineteenth century. While acknowledging the stimulating effect of this so-called 'modernist' view, I argue that its leading tenets are theoretically unsound and historically untenable. The book also challenges the previous critics of 'modernist' theories, who advocate an integration of pre-modern periods into the study of nationalism. While recognising the validity of many of their objections, I maintain that they have so far not provided a convincing counter-theory, which could successfully challenge the modernist narrative. This book claims to present a more accurate picture of the formation of nations by developing such a counter-theory – and it also claims to offer a historical explanation of why nations and nationalism, despite all prophecies of extinction, happily endure in our seemingly post-national period.

The new model being proposed starts by re-examining the main questions a theory of nationalism is supposed to answer. Today the seemingly self-evident task of a theory of nationalism is to try to identify

generic factors and mechanisms that would trigger nationalism in any given setting. If successful, this kind of theory would be able to give a definitive answer to questions such as: why did Estonia become a nation, but not Catalonia? Or, could nations exist prior to industrialisation? I believe that this sort of determinist approach promises much and delivers little, because, to name just one basic problem, it is unhistorical. There is no basis for the assumption that a single law of cause and effect produced nationalism in places as distant and different as England and East Timor.

The theoretical argument in this book is structured by a set of alternative questions: what can be defined as distinctive about nationalism? Where and when can we observe the first appearance of these distinctive features? How are we to understand their emergence historically? And how are we to describe their role in the construction of nations? These questions are based on a different and, I think, more plausible historical assumption, which is that the emergence of nationalism and nations anywhere in the world was only possible (but by no means necessary) because of its original development in one specific place and time. According to my theory, this place and time was Catholic Europe in the Middle Ages. By focusing on the history of Europe, I also suggest reconsidering the role of European political culture within the global history of nationalism. My argument is that while nationalism was able to develop particular characteristics outside of Europe, it was not conceivable outside of the orbit of European culture.

My exploration of theory goes back as far as Roman Antiquity, without regarding Roman political culture itself as nationalist. It relates the origins of nationalism to the legacy of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages, describing the medieval political culture as secondary Roman imperialism within a fragmented territorial structure. It attributes the emergence of nationalism to the particular tensions created by this contradiction. Nationalism, in a nutshell, is here conceived as a political discourse constructed by chronically failing would-be-empires stuck in a battle to keep each other at bay. It is treated as highly competitive, transforming the monarchical quest for universal dominion into an all-encompassing contest between abstract communities. And it is treated as universalistic, too, forcing each body politic which claimed independence to define itself as a nation. The two key elements are national honour, a precious, but volatile capital shared by all community members, and national freedom, the collective rejection of foreign rule and cultural influence.

While nationalism is treated as the principal producer of nations, scholars are treated as the principal producers of nationalism. In the

medieval period, scholars were not only the custodians of Christianity, but also the guardians of Classical Antiquity. From the twelfth century onward, legally and philologically trained clerics tried to adapt the legacy of Rome to contemporary politics; the language of the nation was created in the process. Although the scholarly studies involved in this construction of the nation as an intellectual concept were meant to be of direct political consequence, they did not reshape the political reality immediately. In fact, there was a remarkable time lag between the creation of nationalist language and the implementation of nationalist politics. By the end of the fifteenth century, the concept of the nation was almost fully developed in scholarly literature, whereas in political practice, imperialist, dynastic and religious principles would prevail for another three centuries. To medieval and early modern rulers, nationalism was often attractive as a propagandistic tool, but rarely as an end in itself.

One of this book's main tasks, therefore, is to explain the long-term parallel existence of nationalist scholarship and non-nationalist governance. It does so by analysing the scholarly roles developed by political authors in order to claim public authority and to influence power holders. As these roles systematically failed to provide the desired results, this book will also give an insight into the chronic self-delusions of Western scholars. To understand the origins of nationalism, there is no way around a critical analysis of the same learned culture that today enables us to engage in serious historical research.

The book will start with a general introduction to its subject, method and argument. The subsequent two chapters deal with theory: while the second chapter gives a critical overview of the leading modernist theories of nationalism, the third chapter outlines the new counter-model. From the fourth chapter onwards, this counter-model is unfolded in a historical analysis stretching from the period of the late Roman Republic to the Renaissance and Reformation. The concluding chapter clarifies the historical link between the European origins of nationalism in the Middle Ages and its political triumph in modernity.

1.1 Organism into artefact

The concept of nationhood has always been a dominant theme in modern historiography. The way, however, that it has been perceived and presented by historians has changed dramatically over time. In the nineteenth century, when the past, due to the accelerated change of contemporary life, became increasingly viewed as fragmented and disconnected from the present, nations were still believed to be the

leading actors throughout European history. They were described as collective bodies with particular biographies, qualities and characteristics, interacting with each other on the allegedly main stage of history, international politics. While modern historiography introduced change as the fundamental force of history it portrayed the nation as a stable entity, and while change was assumed to be non-linear, the nation was supposed to grow from a seed in ancient times to full blossom in modern times. It was a matter of necessity, standing above the law of historical relativity of all things.

This image of the nation was to a considerable degree shaped by Romantic ideals of an organic community, as opposed to the 'mechanical' structure of modern society. Despite the passing of Romanticism, this idea remained. One reason for its persistence was that it functioned as the agent of continuity within a historiographical narrative that otherwise ran the risk of fragmentation. Another reason was that it divided the huge field of history into manageable chunks that did not need extra explanation because they were simply presented as part of a natural order. And a third reason can be found in the role the nation provided for modern historians themselves: as its chief biographers they were able to monopolise the position of secular priests – teaching citizens and advising rulers about their deeper identities and duties. Never did historians enjoy more public influence and more political weight than in this period and in this particular role.

No wonder, then, that the function of the nation as a dialectical counterweight to the core principles of historiography was so long-lasting. It was even upheld when it threatened historiographical claims to objectivity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, leading European historians, such as the German Nobel Prize winner, Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), and his younger, hardly less distinguished colleague, Otto Hintze (1861–1940), still saw no point in talking to foreign colleagues because 'national antagonisms' would not allow any common ground for mutual understanding, and so they dismissed 'the idea of an international congress of the historical sciences as preposterous'.[1]

Both scholarship and politics had to undergo major transformations before historians were inclined to treat the nation less as an organism to nourish than as an artefact to deconstruct. There was, to be sure, no complete absence of critical research on the formation of nations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, a few fine works were written, such as Ernest Renan's (1823–92) lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* of 1882 and Carlton Hayes' (1882–1964) *Essays on Nationalism*

[1] Erdmann, *Die Ökumene der Historiker*, 66.

of 1926. However, these works were exceptional and only received increasing attention long after their publication.

Politically, reconsidering the place of the nation in history could have hardly been more imperative than after the World Wars. Interestingly enough though, there was only a slow and gradual shift in the historiographical description of the nation during the post-war decades. Nations were still portrayed as the pivotal political and cultural force from the early medieval period to the present; the only significant change was that they were now perceived as both very constructive and terribly destructive. Attempts were therefore made to distinguish between two oppositional sorts of national sentiment based on older ideas about different types of nations. Some historians separated defensive and moderate patriotism from aggressive and extreme nationalism, taking the first as an indispensable element of modern democracy and the latter as a pathological glorification of the nation state. Others followed the broader distinction by the Jewish American historian Hans Kohn (1891–1971) between civic and cultural nationalism, 'civic' meaning Western, territorial, libertarian, rational and integrative and 'cultural' standing for Eastern, ethnic, authoritarian, irrational and exclusive.[2] Having found such a neat and – at least for Anglo-American and French scholars – self-congratulatory solution, it was possible to continue writing national histories almost as before. Furthermore, the dualistic view on national sentiment served equally well in the new situation of the Cold War. Leading historians in many Western countries could maintain their role as national priests and the public influence and high legitimacy that went with it.

Only when the Cold War turned to a lasting thaw in the 1970s and 80s could the dominant view of nations and nationalism finally start to change. New approaches were facilitated by significant methodological shifts within historiography that had already been underway for a while. Old-style political history was challenged by theoretically more sophisticated social and cultural histories, as was the metaphorical language concerning the 'organic nature' of the nation.

Still, it needed the initiative of scholars outside the field of history, such as political scientists and social anthropologists, to introduce a fresh and stimulating perspective. Some of these scholars had already formulated their theories of nationalism long before – Karl Deutsch (1912–92) in the 1950s, Ernest Gellner (1925–95) in the 1960s and 1970s – but their studies were only widely read from the 1980s onward. What these men had in common (as had most historians who first joined

[2] Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*.

them) was a sceptical, not to say negative attitude towards nations and nationalism, often born of personal experience. Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm (born 1917) were all of Jewish descent, grew up in Prague between the wars and escaped the Nazis to Britain or to America; Benedict Anderson (born 1936) was the son of a protestant Irish father and an English mother, born in China, brought up in California and educated in England at Cambridge. Their biographical backgrounds not only helped them to question the common assumption of nations' naturalness but also to distance themselves from the scholarly role of national priest.

Although modernist theories differed significantly from the start, they were able to carry a new master narrative that has been dominating the field of nationalism studies ever since. It is based on two main arguments: the 'modernist' turn, according to which nations are an exclusively modern phenomenon emerging only in the late eighteenth or even in the nineteenth century, and the 'constructivist' turn, according to which nations are not formed by 'objective' criteria like common territory, language, habits, ancestry, fate etc. but by the common belief in such criteria; they were, in Anderson's famous formulation, 'imagined communities' and, as Gellner put it, products of nationalism, 'and not the other way round'.[3]

The enormous success of these theories certainly had to do with their originality, intellectual brilliance and, at least in some cases, with the elegant style in which they were presented; all this however would probably not have been enough if they did not serve an ideological purpose, too: for many intellectuals, above all those on the political left, the modernist approach came as a confirmation of the nation's artificial character and as an indication of its elusive appearance in history, being newly invented and soon discarded. Not displaying false modesty, Hobsbawm even considered the modernist achievements as a sign of nationalism's early decline. The Owl of Minerva, he remarked referring to Hegel, only flies out at dusk.[4]

Historians have never shown much talent as prophets and so it is no surprise that nations and nationalism have defied all predictions of their rapid decline and eventual disappearance. On the contrary, a statistical study from 2006 on national pride in thirty-three countries, including most Western states, came to the conclusion, that national pride had risen in a majority of them between 1995 and 2004.[5] Although the

[3] Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 55.
[4] Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 183.
[5] Smith and Kim, 'National Pride', 3.

study itself may be of limited significance, its results seem plausible. During the 1990s, the European continent was faced with a multiple clash of nationalities seen in the Yugoslav wars, which made Western Europeans rub their eyes in disbelief, throw up their hands in horror and call the Americans for help. In turn, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 have boosted American nationalism in an astonishing fashion. And as the culture of the United States is still imitated by friends and foes alike, its reinvigorated nationalism quickly rubbed off on other countries.

Nevertheless, despite these developments, the modernist approach has been the prevalent theoretical framework in nationalism studies for twenty years now, which is all the more remarkable as this field of research has expanded massively in the same period, both in scope and in quantity. Meanwhile, even scholars who favour strong national bonds have largely accepted its narrative and have started to use the constructivist method for their own purpose, which is to demonstrate the creativity of nationalist culture and its identity-fostering functions.

1.2 Fighting the modernist cause – a lost cause?

In the shadow of the modernist paradigm, there has always been a small and constant production of studies on nations and nationalism in pre-modern societies, pursued and published both in the English-speaking world and on the European continent. In the last ten years or so, this production has noticeably risen and managed to soften some core arguments by modernist scholars, such as the assertion of the inexistence or complete irrelevance of the nation-forming process in Europe before 1800.

The reasons for opposing the modernist representation of history are manifold. Historians specialising in medieval and early modern European history often cannot bring the modernist portrayal of their periods into line with their own perceptions and, in addition, are sometimes unhappy about the exclusion of their field of research from a prosperous scholarly enterprise. Familiar with primary sources that engage in what they understand as a national discourse, they try to reintroduce the pre-modern world into the story of nations and nationalism. Other intellectuals follow different agendas, of which the most influential is probably the so called 'neo-bourgeois' or 'neo-patriotic' movement in France, Germany and other European countries. Alarmed by what they diagnose as a crisis of national identity, primarily caused by the disciples of 1968, these intellectuals, both scholars and journalists, propagate a renewed awareness and pride in the national 'heritage'

and therefore seek to reanimate the 'memory' of older storylines in national history. They also declare it their duty to challenge right-wing thinkers for their tenure of national discourse.

A widely noticed and highly lucrative result of these efforts has been the French *Lieux de mémoire*, published in several volumes between 1984 and 1993. Their programmatic concept has since been adapted to quite a few other European countries. The original French work contains 127 essays by leading scholars on a whole range of subjects analysing the 'collective memory' of effective (and rather flattering) facts, fictions, monuments, stereotypes and the like in the French national past from the Middle Ages to the present. And it is about some other 'places', too: not only was the *oeuvre* launched as a campaign to recentralise 'le lieu de la nation' in society but also to reoccupy the classic 'lieu de l'historien' as secular priest with one foot in the lecture hall and the other in the government palace. Pierre Nora, the series' editor and a powerful man of letters with good connections to the French 'classe politique', unambiguously called for himself and his fellow historians to take control of public memory again and to serve the citizens' need for a meaningful national past.[6] Though much of this sounds like a direct revival of the nineteenth century, it is noteworthy that it does not come packaged in botanical or biographical imagery, but in a decidedly constructivist rhetoric labelling the nation a 'political artefact'.[7]

Methodologically, most works on pre-modern nations take a different approach from the leading modernist literature. They tend to be less theoretical and more source-based. The terminology they use varies greatly as do their underlying narratives of nation formation. In terms of content, they generally fall into two categories: there are case studies focusing on a particular region and a short period of time, and there are overviews touching on various periods and places. Each has its advantages, but neither is ideally suited to question the modernist approach fundamentally: while specialised studies have limited explanatory power, general treatises offer little solid proof. These respective handicaps may partly explain why modernist theories have not yet been fundamentally challenged and still remain centre stage in nationalism studies.

This book tries to question the modernist narrative more seriously by proposing a broad theory on the historical origins of nationalism and by applying it to a long period of European history, from Classical Antiquity to Early Modernity. It equally tries to avoid the pitfalls of both specialised and general treatises by focusing on a big region in central

[6] Englund, 'The Ghost of Nation Past'. [7] Ibid., 311.

Europe – the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire – and by integrating it into the wider picture of Western European history.

There are two reasons why I concentrate on the Holy Roman Empire. One is practical: its history offers an abundance of written and visual source material, which sheds light on the early making of nations and nationalism from different angles. The other is programmatic: as this book describes nationalism as an unintended product of Roman imperialism, it seems natural to pay special attention to the one European power that officially represented and sustained the continuity of Roman imperialism during the medieval and early modern period. By doing so, however, I will not portray the Holy Roman Empire as the driving force of nationalism; instead, I will attribute the key role to its changing interrelations with other European powers. One result of these interrelations was that the Empire became more and more identified with the 'German nation', which is why this book, through dealing with the Empire, also offers a history of early German nationalism.[8]

With this focus, the book will develop its main line of argument, which is that the origins of nationalism are to be attributed to late medieval Europe, that early forms of nationalism are already to be found in the Renaissance and that modern nationalism could only become such a mobilising force because of its presence in politics, scholarship and art of long ago.

At the same time, the book will describe pre-modern nationalism as a phenomenon in its own right, in many respects distinct from its modern successor, and it will answer the question of how and why the concept of the nation could exist and persist within Old Europe's hierarchical and religious society.

1.3 Turning constructivism downside up

The theory of the origins of nationalism presented in this book is, like the leading modernist theories, based on a constructivist approach; however, it calls into question the understanding of constructivism by Gellner, Hobsbawm and, to some extent, Anderson. Be it in sociology, epistemology, the theory of language or brain research, the rationale of constructivism generally is that all human reality is created and highly variable and therefore leaves no room for the assumption of an original and consistent human nature or a natural way of human life.

[8] I hope it will be self-evident why the book tells the history of early German nationalism without any ambitions to add another futile chapter to the German *Sonderweg* debate or to answer the misleading question: 'Which was the first nation in history?'

This basic assumption is not shared by the above-mentioned modernists. As I will show, Gellner's theory is much closer to Romantic thinking than its rhetoric implies because it understands pre-modern society as natural and real, whereas modern society is viewed as artificial and mechanical. The key difference from the Romantic position is that Gellner attributes the nation to the latter and not to the former. Anderson's labelling of the nation as 'imagined community' sounds constructivist, too, but from a constructivist point of view it is, as he concedes himself, meaningless: every community, from family to humanity as a whole, has to be 'imagined' in order to be 'real'. However, Anderson's book title presents the term 'imagined communities' as a label specially designed for the nation. As a result, the term's glorious career in nationalism studies has much to do with its suitability for the denunciation of the nation as an 'illusion' or 'fabrication'. This, indeed, is more an essentialist than a constructivist undertaking and not very helpful for a thorough understanding of the matter.

The constructivist method applied in this book thus differs considerably from most modernist approaches. Its main point of reference is language, primarily in textual and, to a lesser degree, in visual form. Language thereby is understood as an instrument both to construct and represent realities. Political, social, cultural and linguistic realities are assumed to be closely interlinked, though hardly ever consistent, which is here regarded as a source of ongoing tensions and, ultimately, of historical change. For nationalism, this means that the realities it depicted were neither totally at odds nor completely in accordance with social, political and cultural circumstances. I would like to illustrate this fairly complicated issue with three examples, which have been pivotal in European nation formation and which will be detailed in the following chapters.

The first example concerns the identity of the citizen. The language of European nationalism partly builds on the 'political religion' of the Ancient Roman Republic, which can be described as civic patriotism. It commanded that the duty of every citizen was to sacrifice himself, his family and friends for the sake of the fatherland. Furthermore, it was the citizen's responsibility to play an active part in political assemblies and it was his task to fight potential tyrants who might try to grab state power. When these requirements were taken up by late medieval and early modern nationalists, they were attributed to polities which usually bore little similarity to the Roman Republic. Who, for instance, could be addressed as a citizen in a kingdom like France? Authors remained either vague or, more interestingly, awarded the title to contemporary groups who had little in common with its original bearers. In the early