

Introduction

Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer

Something more than discontent and speculative ingenuity is needed in order to invest a political idea with power over the masses of mankind.

Lord Acton, 'Nationality' (1862)

The long history of 'the nation' as a concept and as a name for various sorts of 'imagined community' commands much acceptance. But when did the nation first become a fundamental *political* factor? This is a question which has been, and continues to be, far more sharply contested. A deep rift still separates 'modernist' perspectives, which view the political nation as a phenomenon limited to modern societies, from the views of scholars concerned with the pre-industrial world who insist, often vehemently, that nations were central to pre-modern political life also. Yet the engagement of these two broad camps with each other's distinctive viewpoints has often resembled a dialogue of the deaf. All this has favoured the perpetuation of an increasingly repetitive discussion about the origins of nations and nationalism.

This unfortunate state of affairs could only be improved, we were convinced, by bringing together specialists in the history of the pre-modern and the modern nation to scrutinise the nation's historical relationship with political power. A number of more specific questions appeared to flow naturally from this theme. When, and under what historical circumstances, did the nation become constitutive, rather than simply descriptive, of state power and legitimacy? Can the nation attain political importance only when mature state institutions exist, requiring participation, as against mere acquiescence, from members of the putative national community? Does the seeming relative unimportance of national bonds in some pre-modern societies – certain states of the European *ancien régime* come to mind – preclude the nation *ever* having political importance in such societies? Should key concepts, such as 'nation' and 'state', be ascribed fixed, trans-historical, meanings, or is a flexible approach more illuminating – one allowing, for example, for the possible existence of distinctive

‘pre-modern nations’, with political qualities and implications different from those associated with modernity?

Our aim was not to encourage a search for a consensual answer to all or even some of these questions. To do so would have been neither possible nor desirable in our view. The real motivation behind the organisation of a conference on ‘Power and the Nation in History’ was the conviction that it was high time that these questions be addressed. The wide-ranging nature of the topic suggested that this could best be achieved by a group of scholars who were willing to place their own contributions in a wider comparative and conceptual context. The concentration on power was to provide our enterprise with the necessary thematic focus. It was not designed to marginalise the cultural and symbolic aspects of the nation as a historical phenomenon; but it does reflect our preference for a cultural history that seeks to demonstrate how particular symbols, myths or narratives helped to shape the political communities we call nations. Thus in a sense, the question that is at the heart of all the essays in this volume concerns the ways in (and extent to) which the national idea began to permeate political institutions (such as states, representative assemblies, churches, dynasties and so on) across historical epochs and geographical spaces in Europe’s past.

The communication between different period specialists has proved both challenging and rewarding, and we hope that the present book will inject new life into a debate that seems to have grown more than a little stale in recent years. This, after all, is its declared objective. Although it is difficult to judge the degree to which the contributors to this volume influenced one another’s thinking during those two April days in Durham, the essays suggest that not a few revisited their original arguments in light of the discussions which we led. We gained the impression, for example, that some of the hard-nosed modernists left as qualified modernists. The past may well be a foreign country, but this is not to say that the splitting of the history of the last two thousand years into two unconnected parts – ‘modernity’ versus ‘pre-modernity’ – is a persuasive, let alone productive, proposition. The visible flexibility on the part of the modernists made it easier for medievalists and early modernists to concede the existence of important qualitative differences between pre-modern and modern manifestations of the national idea. The purpose of this Introduction is to revisit some of the central themes in the scholarly controversy over nations and nationalism, and to highlight how the essays in this volume can add to our understanding of this important subject.¹

POWER AND THE NATION IN THE PRE-MODERN WORLD

The keen interest which students of the ancient, medieval and early modern periods have in recent years taken in the matter of the nation has without doubt extended our picture of the history of collective cultures and institutions. But one consequence has been more ambiguous. In a kind of conference-podium ethnogenesis of their own, scholars of the nation have been led, through heightened awareness of each other's approaches and theories, not on the whole to deeper mutual engagement and benefit, but rather to the excavation of more elaborate historiographical trench-systems and a polarisation of debate around 'us and them' distinctions, replete with *topoi* to mark and stigmatise the 'other' beyond the ramparts. Admittedly, the gulf of perception is not wholly new. Indeed, the chronology of the nation and its historical importance were dividing opinions among German sociologists even before the First World War.² Nonetheless, the proliferation in recent times of writings on the nation from both sides of the current scholarly divide – or 'schism', as one writer terms it – has sharpened the denunciations, heard in some pre-modernist quarters, of the misleading 'sociological stereotypes' being peddled by 'social scientists' on the subject.³ The modernist bogeyman's teachings have not, it is true, fallen wholly on deaf ears, and certain limited but significant elements of his concerns have (by design or default) been assimilated by students of the pre-modern nation. A degree of convergence is particularly detectable in interpretations of the role of *power* in making and sustaining pre-modern 'national' identities. The pre-modern nation is now routinely treated as an essentially artificial, constructed – indeed, with many an approving nod to Benedict Anderson, 'imagined' – community, of a fundamentally political nature, made within history.⁴ Modernists and their adversaries, then, seem increasingly to have in mind at least the same *kinds* of formation, and to envisage comparable social and political processes for their making. This does not, however, mean that consensus is at hand: on the contrary, by claiming the specifically *political* nation for themselves, students of pre-modern societies have only thrown into sharper relief those elements which still divide them from the modernists – whose models, they claim, are now unmasked more starkly than ever as 'somewhat weak on hard history'.⁵

Often it is medievalists who in recent polemics have cast themselves in the role of beleaguered and misunderstood truth-tellers. In part, perhaps, the role has been thrust upon them. Social and political scientists have a habit – ultimately grounded in the rhetorical distinctions of the

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Renaissance, though today shared by ‘quality’ journalists and headline-hungry politicians – of fashioning the European Middle Ages as a singularly quaint, repellent, and deliberately alien backdrop onto which to project their favoured versions of ‘modernity’. Jürgen Habermas, for example, judged the medieval centuries to be uniquely bereft of a ‘public sphere’ of political culture.⁶ In such accounts of the modernising process, ‘the Middle Ages’, with their ‘private’, ‘feudal’ political world, serve as a functional antithesis – one which, in its strangeness and artificiality, evokes on occasion the imaginative flights of literary Romanticism. But medievalists, in their turn, have hardly been reluctant to take up the cudgels against the modernist position. Perhaps there are elements in the European Middle Ages themselves, and in the approaches adopted in recent times to their study, that help to explain why that should be.

A few self-evident truths about the ‘medieval’ epoch perhaps bear reiteration here. Striking first of all is its sheer length: between Constantine and Luther lie a full twelve centuries. Over such a vast period, across the richly varied landscapes of continental Europe and its appurtenant islands, we must expect to find an immense variety of forms of political and social life. Yet, amid this variety, there are clear long-term patterns of change too. In the fifth century urban life was mostly confined to the heartlands of the disintegrating Roman Empire; by the fifteenth, towns – some very large – were to be found throughout Europe, from Ireland to Lithuania, from Norway to Sicily. In the early Middle Ages, much of the continent was wilderness; by the later medieval centuries, patterns of human habitation had been established which in many regions broadly anticipated those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The population of Europe as a whole experienced massive growth over the medieval period – checked, but not ultimately reversed, by epidemic disease in the late Middle Ages. Core technologies and organisational forms, particularly in agriculture, were transformed; and over the course of several centuries western Europeans migrated in substantial numbers into neighbouring and more distant lands, where they reproduced their indigenous social, economic and political formations. In a related process, the Middle Ages saw Europeans forge new, often violent and exploitative, relationships with non-European peoples, their cultures and civilisations. A range of different communications channels and technologies emerged, stimulated partly by the development of trade and commerce, partly by the needs and resources of the Church and secular government. Catholic Christianity carried Latin literacy to the remotest corners of the continent; by the end of the Middle Ages, writing in the various European vernaculars was also commonplace.

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The intellectual, legal and cultural inheritance of Antiquity was likewise disseminated far and wide, a resource for rulers and their educated champions and opponents. The social and institutional contexts within which education and higher learning were pursued changed fundamentally, becoming over the course of centuries more diverse and, in many regions, more widely accessible. A pattern of discrete political communities, among them many new kingdoms, gradually formed, which in much of Europe was destined to endure in broad outline down to modern times. Institutionalised, literate and intrusive secular government, in the fifth century a decaying remnant of Roman imperialism, had by the fifteenth become general in Europe – resting upon explicit, ambitious and complex ideological foundations. All these long-term developments (and others besides), medievalists contend, had a hand in the formation and consolidation in Europe of self-conscious ethno-political communities – of ‘nations’.⁷

The significance of these observations becomes clearer when we notice another salient characteristic of the European Middle Ages: their relative proximity, taking a broad view of the nation in history, to those very societies on which modernists habitually focus. The France of Villon and Joan of Arc had substantive elements – social, economic, cultural, religious, even political, not to mention geographical, topographical and climatic – in common with the France of 1789, or even of 1848 or 1871, that none of those societies shared with, let us say, Davidic Israel or the Egypt of Ramses II. The broad distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ epochs and societies has its legitimate uses: it is, indeed, drawn repeatedly by contributors to the present volume. But it runs the risk of obscuring things that should not be obscured. Not every component of the relationship between nations and power can be made to turn on a historical hinge marked with the date 1789 (or with any other ‘milestone’ date or period on the road to ‘modernity’). Not all the factors which constitute the political stature of this or that modern nation are likely to be unambiguously ‘modern’; and not everything that commands our attention in a given pre-modern nation will necessarily be characteristic of ‘pre-modern’ nations as such. Typologies properly have their part in the study of the nation in history; but so too does an awareness of the contingencies of time, place and circumstance, and of the conditioning role of specific, unique common pasts. No one, indeed, has grounded the making of nations more firmly within concrete processes of historical change than have the modernists themselves. Kedourie’s nationalism was famously ‘invented *in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century*’ (my italics).⁸ The nation, in this view, first

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attained importance in a specific place – Europe – at a particular time, within definite, identifiable historical processes. If such a contention poses a challenge to medievalists, it also presents them with an opportunity. For medievalists too are concerned, on a long view, with the development of just those European polities which, in modernist accounts, gave birth to the politicised nation. Who, then, is to say precisely when those crucial formative processes first reached fruition? There is clearly room for more than one viewpoint.

No one is more aware than the medievalist of the sheer magnitude of those processes of historical change that lie concealed beneath the bland label ‘medieval’. He or she is unlikely to be persuaded that Europe in 1500 – with its crowded towns, mobile goods and wealth, demanding princes, assertive burghers, periodically vocal peasantries, parliaments and estates, (potentially ‘total’) wars, pogroms and uprisings, universities, print shops, newsletters, vernacular religious and political cultures – in its capacity for imagining and politicising the nation axiomatically shared more in common with the Europe of AD 500 (not to speak of yet more remote ‘pre-modern’ worlds) than with that of 1800. Such a viewpoint also puts into a fresh perspective the 250–300 years of the ‘early modern’ period – which, for all their own distinctive developments, on a long view of the European past become less obviously distinct from, on the one hand, the later centuries of the long ‘Middle Ages’ and, on the other, the early decades of European ‘modernity’ proper. It is not hard, then, to understand why some medievalists have been such strident critics of the modernist paradigm. The important question, however, is whether they have been *persuasive* critics.

Modernists could, after all, in their turn legitimately retort that it is all well and good to detect ‘medieval people’ describing their world in terms of *naciones* and *gentes*;⁹ but did such terms really constitute a fully functioning doctrine of nation, comparable to the modern one? If an identifiable conception of the nation did exist, how did it relate to other ideas about community, allegiance and power? How relatively *important* was it? And who were these ‘medieval people’ anyway? Just the (untypical?) literate minority who have left a record of their thought? Is there any reason to suppose that such beliefs were more widely held? If so, *how* widely? To what extent were they sustained by institutional structures, ‘public’ spaces, roles and obligations, and by communications media comparable to those judged so important in the modern period? If belief in the nation was widespread, was it more than just a passive assumption? Did it cause people to behave in specific, identifiable ways? Did it serve merely to elucidate and

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legitimise existing political arrangements, or could it be invoked to challenge or change them? These are important and difficult questions – ones that medievalists, and students of the pre-modern nation more generally, do not always confront squarely enough. Some of them are, as pre-modernists occasionally concede, in many cases impossible to answer from the surviving evidence. Nevertheless, a brief survey of some of the answers that *have* in recent times been supplied, both by contributors to the present volume and by others, should provide at least a glimpse of the kinds of political substance which the nation in pre-modern societies could command, as well as highlighting those aspects of the problem where further work is needed.

Even as a concept, the existence of the national political community in the Middle Ages does not appear secure. Eric Hobsbawm has written that ‘in its modern and basically political sense the concept *nation* is historically very young’.¹⁰ It is certainly not hard, by perusing some of the best-known studies of medieval political thought, to form such a view, since few of them find much to say about the nation.¹¹ Such volumes are not, however, a trustworthy guide, tending as they traditionally have to privilege the abstract, the demanding and the novel. The idea of nation was none of these things. Instead, it was deeply rooted in classical and biblical ethnography and belonged, as Susan Reynolds insists, to the mostly unexamined, yet highly influential, subsoil of commonplace belief and assumption.¹² Not only, in Reynolds’s view, was the medieval concept of nation political; it was *distinctively* so – a community of shared allegiance which, by that fact, came over time to be conceived as a unit of common blood, descent and destiny too (Reynolds). While all communities, down to the village, could be imagined as descent groups, kingdoms had a distinctive status as (imagined) ethnic unities, with the result that ‘medieval ideas about kingdoms and peoples were very like modern ideas about nations’.¹³ This pattern of interconnected political assumptions ultimately matters more for our view of the concept of the medieval nation than does the existence (or not) of a contemporary array of terms precisely and unambiguously matching modern ones in this area. A medieval vocabulary of ‘nation’ there certainly was, and it was quite articulate and extensive; yet most of its component words were notoriously capable of bearing a range of other meanings too, depending on context. Nevertheless, in many cases at least, terms like *populus* and *natio* were clearly deployed to signify communities understood simultaneously as political and ethnic unities.¹⁴ They tended, moreover, to become fortified over time by a growing array of supporting terms and concepts,

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expressive of increasingly explicit and absolute ties between power and common belonging. The 'native' (*naturalis*), 'true-born' (*verus*) member of the commonality (*regnum, res publica*) naturally longed to be ruled by native princes, not foreigners (*alienigenae*); in return, however, he or she could by the later Middle Ages be summoned, in a revived language of Roman patriotism, to bear burdens and make sacrifices 'for the fatherland' (*pro patria*).¹⁵ The same period saw the language of blood and power joined to classical ethnography to form an offensive rhetorical weapon, justifying colonial rule and expropriation by certain self-styled medieval master-peoples, at the expense of their allegedly less advanced ('barbarian') neighbours.¹⁶ The language of nation in the Middle Ages was therefore political in a two-fold sense: not only did it describe fundamentally political relationships, its emergence and development also mapped the consolidation of stable, sophisticated and domineering political communities.

Medievalists argue persuasively for the significance of ideas of common ethnicity in medieval political culture, and for the existence of deep-rooted similarities between pre-modern and modern conceptions of the nation (Reynolds). They cannot, however, afford to rest their case there, since modernist accounts of the nation in history deal with more than just ideas. Indeed, one of the strengths of modernist approaches lies in the rigour with which they have examined the social foundations and consequences of nations and nationalism. In these fields, students of the pre-modern nation face sterner challenges. Ernest Gellner's famous diagram of the working of 'power and culture in the agro-literate polity' portrayed a world in which 'almost everything . . . militates against the definition of political units in terms of cultural boundaries'.¹⁷ Ruling elites in pre-modern societies were, in Gellner's view, both rigidly stratified internally and fundamentally set apart from the peasant majority of the population. The nation had no role in such societies; only under the conditions of modernity did it become functionally necessary. Medievalists can of course reply that, as a matter of plain fact, their sources quite routinely define 'political units' in terms of 'cultural boundaries'. But that does not exhaust the challenge posed by Gellner's model. Is the map of 'lines of cultural cleavage', that Gellner believed fractured and fragmented pre-modern societies from within, an accurate one?¹⁸ If so, then, even if it is allowed that the nation existed as *idea* in such societies, it is hard to see how it could ever be a materially *important* idea.

But in fact, however faithfully Gellner's diagram might depict other 'agro-literate' societies, as a portrayal of the varied and changing cultural

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landscapes of medieval Europe it must be deemed crude to the point of caricature. It is also misleading, exaggerating as it does the homogeneity and distinctiveness of the groups comprising the 'ruling class', overstating the absoluteness of the cultural barriers between different social strata, and underestimating the penetrative capacities of medieval political ideas. Precisely where, in medieval societies, lay the (often fluid) boundary between rulers and ruled, between those embraced by and those shut out from the 'political nation' is seldom easy to judge.¹⁹ What we can say is that medieval political 'elites' were commonly larger, and more diverse in composition, than modernist – and, indeed, some medievalist – generalisations often allow. In particular, from early England or colonial Ireland to Lithuania, a broad, numerous – though not necessary wealthy or well-connected – stratum of secular arms-bearers appears to have been prominent in sustaining notions and sentiments of political solidarity (Wormald, Frame, Frost).

The political culture of the Middle Ages, it is now clear, was in general more participatory, less apt to exclude people on principle, than Gellner's view suggests. Nor was it, as modernist accounts tend to assume, overwhelmingly concerned with 'private' relationships within the 'feudal' elite. The routine assumptions underpinning medieval political life, though without question profoundly hierarchical, also gave more emphasis to broad political involvement, and to 'public' rights and duties, and showed less concern with enforcing absolute internal social divisions, than is commonly supposed.²⁰ Each of these, traditionally underrated, tendencies appears potentially favourable to a political role for the concept of nation. Reynolds has pointed to an ingrained habit among scholars of emphasising vertical at the expense of horizontal bonds in medieval society.²¹ Yet often these were communities deeply imbued with both the principle and the practice of collective action – in law, in local self-government, and in dealings with the political 'centre'. The parliaments and estates that were such a pronounced feature of the late medieval and early modern periods were merely a particularly large-scale and formalised expression of more ancient, pervasive and routine habits of association, consultation, and common judgement and decision-making.²² Such assemblies were evidently capable of bringing together large and relatively diverse groups of people in regular, politically significant, association and common action – even in the absence of visible formal structures (Wormald). Their origins, where we can glimpse them, appear on occasion remote indeed.

Yet despite all this, it seems hard to imagine how medieval societies could have sustained a genuinely and self-consciously 'national' political

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culture. Did not intense localism, and the meagreness and fragility of the channels available for transmitting ideas, guarantee that pre-modern European political discourse was every bit as sharply truncated and parcelled-up as Gellner's neatly ruled horizontal and vertical lines suggest? Perhaps we should at least hesitate for a moment before answering this question in the affirmative. First of all, we should not underestimate the capacity of government, its structures and its demands, to forge and sustain common political identities – fashioning on occasion new, self-conscious, composite ('national') political communities out of previously discrete and disparate ethnic groups (Frame, Frost, Thornton). How did this come to pass? What resources did pre-modern structures of power bring to bear? Medievalists must, of course, curb any innate over-eagerness to trace in remote societies the precocious lineaments of political unification (Foot). Nevertheless, they are entitled occasionally to remind their modernist counterparts of just what government might do, even without the advantages of an industrial society.

Even 'dark-age' kingdoms could on occasion manage impressive organisational feats – exacting general oaths of allegiance, for example, or completing ambitious, labour-intensive 'public works' projects.²³ Duties of service in royal armies could be extensive, penetrating deep into the countryside – though the social reach of military obligations did vary widely between different places and times, another reminder of the hurdles in the way of blithely generalising about the scope of 'pre-modern' political culture.²⁴ Pre-modern realms also gathered taxes: by the late Middle Ages they were doing so systematically, frequently and, in many a hard-pressed subject's view, extortionately. But by this time, the institutional channels of command and demand were carrying a two-way traffic. If governments grew increasingly adept at hectoring and coercing, they also learned to listen and persuade.²⁵ By the late Middle Ages, the persuasive and consultative channels at the disposal of some European regimes were varied, flexible and far-reaching. Fourteenth-century English sheriffs were instructed to publicise royal decrees not only in the shire court (itself the regular meeting-place for a large, diverse political public) but 'in cities, boroughs, market towns and other places where you shall see fit'.²⁶ Social and economic changes over the medieval centuries had greatly extended the number and range of venues in which messages from the 'centre' were received and reflected upon. Their density and interconnections, their scope for nurturing common attitudes, their historical contingency and specificity – such things are elided and lost in schematic visions of 'the agro-literate polity'.