

Nations and Nationalism 26 (1), 2020, 5–21.
DOI: 10.1111/nana.12538

The nation as the cradle of nationalism and patriotism*

MIROSLAV HROCH

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT. This paper argues against dismissing as ‘populist nationalism’ every positive view of one’s nation and ignoring patriotism as its antithesis. The European nation exists in two senses: as a large ‘social group’, a community of real people, and as an abstract community of cultural values promoted by intellectual elites grounded in a humanities-based education. The widespread prejudice that condemns every positive expression of one’s relationship to the nation has proved counterproductive because it has prompted ever stronger spontaneous reactions in the form of primitive nationalistic egoism. This has weakened the commitment people feel towards their nation and the humanistic potential that the nation possesses as a cultural community of values. Consequently, anti-national European intellectual elites bear some responsibility – along with those preaching neoliberal individualism – for the success of populist demagogues and the decline in patriotic values. Given the state of education today, a revival of humanist culture for national elites seems impossible, making the continued rise of primitive nationalism appear unstoppable.

KEYWORDS: abstract community, European Union, humanist education, nation, nationalism, patriotism

Introductory remarks

Why is having a positive relationship to one’s own nation nowadays always associated with the ‘extreme right’? If Marine Le Pen says that the EU harms the national interests of France, it is extreme-right nationalism; if Angela Merkel says that a strong EU is in the national interest of Germany, this is ... what? When Montenegrins decided to expand their autonomy inside Serbia into independence, this was generally accepted, including by the EU. When the Scottish or Catalan parliament seeks to attain statehood for their nation through a referendum, this is condemned, also by the EU, as separatism and nationalism. When Helmut Kohl negotiated the unification of the two German states, without asking the population for its opinion, this was celebrated, and still is, as the act of a patriotic statesman. *Quod licet Jovi ...?* In the turbulence that has followed the Brexit decision, the migration crisis and the turnaround in Italy,

*Occasionally, the journal publishes articles which express an author’s particular viewpoint on a topic or theoretical issues under the heading “Viewpoint.” This is one such submission.

a place could be found in the speeches of the German Chancellor and the French President to reflect on the difference between nationalism and patriotism. Is this a promising sign of a changing paradigm emerging, or merely a tactical manoeuvre?

I base this paper on my old axiom that we cannot analyse nationalism without also analysing the nation. To this, I would newly add the assertion that from a historical perspective, the nation is a specifically European phenomenon, and one of the main reasons for this is that it originally took shape (and to the present day still exists) in two interrelated senses – or in other terms, on two interrelated levels: on the level of a large social community that exists in reality (it is a ‘sociological fact’) and on the level of an abstract community of (shared) cultural values, i.e. as a specific cultural construct. This offers us a new and innovative approach or perspective from which to study the processes that led to the formation of modern European nations.

Below, I will try to document and explain why the nation in the sense of a community of shared values is currently being devalued and marginalised, while the nation as a sociological fact continues to thrive. The cause of this inconsistency is the neoliberal shift that has occurred on the value scale, one result of which has been the decline of education in the humanities. Another factor has been the postmodern campaign against ‘nationalism’, which has been supported by the European Union among others. I focus my discussion here on the situation of ‘young nations’, the nations that were formed – in both the East and the West – by ‘national movements’. This is the term used for the movements that over the course of the nineteenth century strove to acquire for their nation all the attributes associated with being a nation and upon succeeding in most cases went on achieve the formation of a nation-state. Whether one likes it or not, this is how the majority of the nation-states that exist in Europe today were formed.

A peculiar refrain has established itself in the current intellectual climate in the mainstream media: when anyone speaks favourably about their nation, they are immediately labelled a ‘nationalist’. An individual or a group of individuals can be nationalists – but can a ‘nation’ be nationalist? Can a nation have an opinion? What is the nature of the relationship between an individual and his or her nation? If any of us were to ask ourselves what comes to mind and what we mean when we use the term ‘nation’, while trying to steer clear of any prefabricated labels in our thinking, we would find that the term is used with two meanings, which correspond to the two levels mentioned above. These two meanings also are interconnected: one meaning (sense) is that of the ‘nation’ as a specific kind of collectivity (*a social group*) and the other refers to the ‘nation’ as an abstract community of cultural values.

The nation’s two meanings

What I will say now about the ‘two meanings’ of the term is nothing fundamentally new. I am not trying to rediscover something we already know. It

is telling that when the terms 'Europe' or 'mankind' are used, the distinction between the abstract (the cultural construct the term refers to) and the concrete (the sample of inhabitants it refers to) interpretations is almost self-evident, but when it comes to the term 'nation', this distinction has to be rediscovered and explained.

In the first and concrete sense of the term, when we speak of a nation, we are referring to a large social group or community, an objectively existing collection of citizens who are conscious of their belonging, for instance, to the Polish, the German or the Czech nation, and who act according to that sense of belonging, which can grow in strength to the point where it becomes identification with that nation. This kind of group objectively exists but that was not always the case; such groups emerged in Europe in the course of modernisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Individuals, who make up the members of the social group or community that is called a 'nation', communicate and interact with each other in the course of their everyday activities. They work together, they have conflicts, they each get along well with some people, better with others and find yet others unbearable; they variously come together or break apart and go their own way. An individual's relationship to the nation cannot be sweepingly embraced within the well-worn and moreover ambiguous term 'nationalism'. The nature of individuals' relationship to their nation can range from a sense of belonging, to identification with a group, to patriotism and even to nationalism.

The nation serves as a kind of frame for all of this. Sooner or later, in most cases, the members of this group become the citizens of one state, speaking the same language and sharing similar life experiences and customs, and it is because of this that they understand each other well. I have devoted most of my research to the study of the nation in this sense, of a social group, a community or, as Anthony Smith calls it, a sociological fact. Today, I realise that this perspective was one-sided, though I still believe that this level is crucial to the existence of a nation.

In my reflections about nation formation, I have devoted little attention to the way the nation exists in our minds or imagination and the way it exists in our everyday life in a different sense, where it denotes a supra-individual unit, a construct that people know about and consciously or unconsciously regard as something positive. The nation in this sense figures as an abstract community, as something that holds or represents certain values. The fundamental value, however, is not the social group itself that is referred to as a nation but the cultural contents, the attributes or characteristics that are associated with this personalised understanding of the nation, and that are perceived as something intangible, abstract, and that the members of the 'nation', that specific social group, can proudly embrace. To put it more concretely: This polymorphous and constantly changing abstract entity comprises also a cultivated language (i.e. regarded above all as a symbol and a value), its past and present works of literature, arts and music, and a shared historical past, either a glorious one or one of shared suffering. It also encompasses achievements in science

and technology and remembrance of how some members of the nation contributed to human progress. In some nations, the nation's values also come to incorporate religion, or pride in the nation's democratic system or welfare state. Coupled with this is the more or less unconscious notion that a measure or criterion of value is how these cultural achievements or historical acts could be presented as a 'contribution' that enriches the supranational community – of Europe or of mankind in general. It is understandable that individual citizens' notions of what in any given case is or is not a national value vary. The cohesion of the nation rests on how strong a sense of consensus there is about what constitutes the nation's values.

This notion of the nation as an abstract community of cultural values was not imposed from the top down; it emerged as the outcome of actions by members of the educated elites, who consciously embraced the emerging nation, and consequently, it was this conception of the nation as a value that they spread among members of their ethnic community whom they regarded as the nation *in spe*.

What should we call these efforts or actions? If we are willing to work with labels, we could say that *nationalism* originates mostly on the level of a nation's social reality, in a space of conflict where material interests clash and there are struggles for power. Conversely, actions that work towards the benefit of the nation as a community of cultural values should mainly be referred to by the term *patriotism*. In some languages, however, this term has a different connotation, and it does not appear that it can be a substitute for the term 'romantic nationalism', as Joep Leerssen understands it, or the term 'humanist nationalism' in the sense put forth by Carlton Hayes.

Where do these two levels of national existence intersect? The nation, as an abstract community and as a cultural value, came about as the result of efforts made by real people, who considered themselves, and today are still considered to be, members of their nation, and for whom being a member of the nation – in the sense not of a social group but of an abstract community – was not just a source of pride, but also, and in fact above all, signified a commitment, the commitment of the individual to this national community. This includes the idea of being obliged to participate in improving and enriching national values. This idea, where belonging to a nation is understood as a value and a commitment, is a legacy of the European nineteenth century. It is the legacy of an age when 'small nations' – in the sense of concrete large social communities – were in the process of formation. Phase B of the national agitation, the phase in which the national movement turns to and addresses a specific population as members of the nation *in spe*, thus went hand in hand with the purposeful endeavour to develop and enrich the nation in the sense of an abstract cultural community.

In other words, we can speak here of the existence of nations as something that has historical roots, as having grown out of the traditions of European humanism, Baroque- and Enlightenment-era patriotism and later on Romanticism. Should anyone object that this has been said many times before

and that in this respect, we are speaking of a mere cultural construct, they would of course be right. What is crucial, however, is that in Europe, they were and sometimes still are understood and pursued as constructs that seek to humanise mankind.

The nation as a specifically European phenomenon

The way a nation in the sense of a social group comes to be intertwined with and interact with the nation as an abstract cultural community, as a commitment to humanity, is one of the basic reasons why I consider nations to be a specifically European phenomenon.

This is of course by no means the only reason. If we want to analyse the roots of the modern nation and at the same time ask what is the source of the positive connotations it has everywhere in Europe, we need to look for the context in which this term was used in the distant past. The most general context was provided by the Old Testament, from which Europeans learned about a nation that had been persecuted and conquered and had to struggle against its enemies. And it struggled with the help of the Lord, because it comprised the 'chosen people'. The relationship (of the people) to the nation was also significantly influenced by historical tales from Ancient history – by the tales of the patriotism of Greek villages fighting against the Persians and perhaps even more importantly by the stories of the successful Roman republic and its brave republicans. Could the image of 'Cives Romanus' not have served as the archetype for the modern patriot?

However, as is generally known, 'natio' was a neutral term in the Ancient history and referred to regional communities; this did not mean, though, that there were no conflicts between groups who differed by language. It is not surprising that ethnic communities usually referred to themselves as a 'lingua'. The myth of mediaeval knights was an international one, but over the course of several centuries, the knights went from being in service to their king to being in service to their country, their homeland, and after winning themselves a hand in state power in the Estates monarchy, they themselves became the representatives of the 'nation'. In some cases, this was already being explicitly expressed in political terminology in the early modern era: the Polish nobility proudly wore the label 'Natio Polonica', the Hungarians were the 'Natio Hungarica' and the English term 'nation' even back then extended beyond the frame of the closed aristocratic class.

However, of greater importance for later nation-formation processes were the objective changes that European culture and society went through, which had only an indirect impact on nations, but created the necessary preconditions for their formation. The first such change that warrants mention is the rise of humanism, which offered a new picture of humanity as a value (in its own right), but re-introduced the tales of patriotism from the time of Antiquity. The Reformation ushered in the objective to convert church services

and especially Scripture into the national tongue and to transform the faceless mass of believers into members of an autonomous religious community. Indeed, the majority of European national movements would later be able to trace the foundations of their ‘printed language’ back to the time of the Reformation.

The next and perhaps crucial building blocks that made up the originally unintended concept of the nation came from the regional patriotism of the secularised Enlightenment, which obliged educated elites to work for the benefit or welfare of their homeland, whose inhabitants were increasingly coming to be referred to with the term ‘nation’. Even more important, however, was how enthusiastic Enlightenment scholars were about knowledge, and a growing number of them began to consciously make use of knowledge to the benefit of their nation. They thereby laid the foundations of the nation as a community of cultural values and initiated Phase A of their national movement. That phase then acquired its emotional charge – and became a value – from Romanticism. All this occurred neither by accident nor arbitrarily but as a response to the existential insecurity and deep crisis of values that set in with the collapse of the old feudal system of dependencies.

I mention this long journey from the neutral ‘*natio*’ or ‘*gens*’ to the emotionally connotative nation here so that I can at least briefly explain what I see to be the source of the distinctiveness of the European nation. Nowhere else in the world do we know of an evolutionary trajectory like this. Although political formations emerged on other continents in the twentieth and sometimes (most notably in Latin America) even the nineteenth century that called themselves ‘nations’, they arose in altogether different civilisational settings with entirely different cultural traditions. Most of them were just units of political power whose ruling elites only subsequently sought to find symbols, objects or historical narratives that could serve as a substitute for a cultural community. Only in some Asian countries was the European concept of a nation imported as an instrument with which to modernise the country, but without the traditions of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Despite this obvious difference, all these nation-formation processes, in Europe and outside, are referred to in English-language literature with the same term – ‘nationalism’. Whether this is done out of convenience or ignorance, it is nevertheless a source of misunderstanding, especially when the term ‘nationalism’, which has now been transformed (in meaning) by globalisation, is used as a tool for analysing the European past.

The interpretative potential for historians?

Looking at the nation from the perspective of its two meanings is not intended as just some intellectual exercise but as a challenge and a suggestion for a new paradigm for the purpose of historical study. I do not know whether anyone has ever attempted to make use of this distinction and linked the two levels

together as a starting point for a comparative study of nation-formation processes, but it would be useful to do so.

In the well-known debates about whether nations (and ‘nationalisms’) already existed in the premodern era or even in the Ancient history, it would certainly be useful if the substantial evidence of the collective cohesion of groups that defined themselves at that time in ethnic terms could be regarded as a sign of the formation of the premodern nation and a community of cultural values. This community differs from the modern nation in that the majority of the non-noble population did not identify with it. That is why I prefer not to speak of the nation then as a large social group, even in the above-cited examples of the *Natio Polonica* or *Natio Hungarica*. Although we can find statements and expressions in the rhetoric of the secular and church elites back then that are similar to what was heard later in the times of modern national struggles, such as expressions of a hatred of foreigners, it would be extremely misplaced to use the label ‘nationalism’ to describe them. To be thorough, it should be noted that the social exclusivity of the nation as a community of shared values that was open only to the noble elites of feudal society only began to break down with the revolts of the Flemish towns in the first half of the fourteenth century and the Hussite movement in the Czech lands a century later, when national cohesion spread across all of society.

The crucial time for both meanings of the nation only occurred with the onset of the modern nation-formation processes. This was in part due to the fact that every European nation went through its formation process sooner or later within the context of a modernising European society. An organic part of this modernisation was the spread of education (and not just literacy) among the wider strata of the population. It was only thanks to this that it was then possible for a sense of national awareness to spread successfully. In other words, it was only once a certain level of education had been attained that the nation, in the sense of a cultural abstraction and as a community with a shared fate, became intelligible to and appealed to the wider population. This was not, however, education as we understand it today, that is, as the learning of practical skills. Rather, the most important prerequisite for the spread of national culture was that the elites of almost every European country in the nineteenth century received a humanities-based education grounded in historicism, a veneration of classical virtues (patriotism being one such virtue), literature, philosophy and an understanding of the arts.

I will leave aside the nation-states that formed as a direct successor to a mediaeval cultural (and political) community of feudal elites and limit myself to the national movements that ultimately led to the formation of small nations and their nation-states. In this case, it was during Phase A of the national movements that the nation as an abstract community was defined and constructed by a group of scholars and educated laypeople, who in the spirit of Enlightenment patriotism studied the past and the literary traditions, folk culture, language and lifestyle of ‘their’ nation. Phase A consequently played a crucial and irreplaceable role in shaping the nation in the future into a

community of cultural values. During Phase B, the patriotic educated elites sought to win acceptance for this construct among their compatriots, i.e. among members of their ethnic community. As this group took shape and assumed the form of a mass movement during Phase C, the culture of this abstract national community grew richer, the national past was discovered, discussed and reinterpreted and there were improvements in education and the quality of life. It was only with the successful mass movement, which is to say after the wider strata of the population had accepted and embraced the basic attributes of the cultural community as their own, that the sense of national belonging came to encompass both meanings of national existence: the nation as a social group and the nation as a community of shared cultural values.

Examples of the two levels of nation formation

At the opening session of the parliament of the (newly united) Italian kingdom, the following much-cited words were spoken: 'We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians.' If we interpret the state structure denoted by 'Italy' to mean the value community of the Italian elites, we can deem this statement a model expression of the two levels or meanings on which a nation forms: a community of shared cultural values had been established (and moreover saw its roots as stretching back to the time of Ancient Rome), but the creation of the nation as a large social unit, that is to say, the mass adoption of a positive understanding of (the Italian) national identity, remained a task for the future. In the Italian case, this would take many more decades.

Well-known are the heroic battles of Polish patriots to regain lost statehood in the uprisings in 1830, 1848–1849 and 1863–1864 and the romantic idea of messianism, according to which the Polish nation sacrifices itself for the good of all humanity – or at least all European humanity. However, the majority of the Polish-speaking rural population did not take part in this struggle; until the 1860s, Polish leading patriots usually were not at all seeking the mass inclusion of the peasant population within the Polish nation. The attempt to create a Polish nation as a large social community, an organic unit that would encompass all citizens, did not begin on most of Poland's territory until the 1860s. The 'Polish nation' as an abstract community, one of shared cultural values, for which Polish patriots (most of them from the nobility) made the ultimate sacrifice, had been generally embraced more than a century before the Polish nation actually formed in the real sense of the word, that is, as a 'sociological fact'.

The very opposite relationship between the two meanings of nation formation from that observed in the Polish case was the Serbian case. The first Serbian uprisings (1805 and 1815) were in some regions already mass uprisings and were more akin to peasant wars. Serbian ethnic territory had been occupied by the Ottomans, and as a result, the Serbian elites (except those in

Vojvodina on Hungarian territory) did not experience humanism or the Enlightenment. The core segment of the population in the central part of Serbian territory held committed quasi-national, patriotic convictions. The emergence of the nation as a social formation thus somehow took place *before* conscious patriotic efforts began work on building the nation as a community of cultural values. In a situation where most people were illiterate, the ‘nation’ as an abstraction was for many long decades based on orally communicated poetic works and on the historical myth of a lost Serbian kingdom communicated in the form of epic poems.

The Serbian and Polish examples represent two extreme poles on the scale of different relationships that can exist between the nation as a social reality and a cultural construct during the course of a national movement. Most other national movements lay in between the two extremes represented by the Poles and the Serbs, and I can present the Czechs as one example. The foundations of the Czech cultural community in its abstract sense were laid by Enlightenment scholars in the eighteenth century, or Phase A of the Czech national movement. The movement’s followers, influenced by Romanticism, strove over the course of Phase B of the movement to spread knowledge of the value dimensions of the Czech nation (for example, its history, folklore and literary work). After the national movement’s success, the members of the nation as a social group came to identify with their nation’s community of shared cultural values.

For most national movements, the formation of the nation similarly unfolded on two levels, albeit more or less belatedly. These movements then led to the formation of a community that I call a ‘small nation’, where ‘small’ does not refer to the number of members or the (small) size of the territory the group occupied but is a typological reference. Being part of the ‘small nation’ category also means being ascribed similar collective stereotypes – for example, that such nations had a sense of external threat and that their existence as a nation was not a given.

New directions for studying the evolution of nations and examining their specific features can thus be sought by analysing the relationship between the two levels of a nation’s existence described above.

A weakening of the nation’s value dimension

The two levels of a nation’s existence can be observed even in the present day, when nations are already fully formed communities. Even today, we can find a productive point from which to embark on an analysis of the nationality issue in Europe, including the roots of nationalism. However, the relationship between the two levels of a nation’s existence, and the significance they have for each other, has assumed a different form in recent decades. Let us set out from the primary position of a nation as a really existing social group that is internally differentiated – not just in social terms or in terms of interests but

also by level of education and by people's different value orientations. This is why not all members of a nation perceive their relationship to their nation in the sense of an abstract cultural value or understand the content of this entity in the same way: in exaggerated terms, we could say that everyone has their own idea about the structure and characteristics of their nation in the sense of an abstract community and about the values of that nation.

This tension between the nation as a cultural construct and the nation as a social group is what helps to explain a number of problems connected with national belonging that a certain section of every nation is contending with in contemporary Europe.

We can ask then: To what extent is the traditional concept of belonging to a nation – which embraces the idea that this relationship involves a commitment, the idea that belonging or national identification is a service – compatible with a critical view of specific segments of that same nation, whether this means a particular individual or entire groups. If we are not aware that we are using the term nation on two levels, it is easy for a critical view of a certain segment of the nation, a class or a professional group to come to be equated with a rejection or condemnation of the nation as a whole. This way of confusing and conflating concepts and values, which happens when the shortcomings of an individual or group are generalised into an attribute of the 'national character', is nothing new. But it is certainly a stronger occurrence today than it was in the past.

There used to be a general social consensus that that which is called a nation in the sense of an abstract community is a positive value.

We can demonstrate this using the example of historical awareness. The notion of a shared national fate often transforms in response to changes in contemporary society. It is not certain whether it is still true today that as a rule the more consensual the picture of a nation's past and the more generally accepted that picture is, the more consolidated the abstract notion of the nation is too. Nevertheless, even diverging opinions on certain events in national history in no way undermine the actual idea that a (nation's) given history – as 'our' history – is nonetheless the shared history of every member of the nation.

As an abstract value community, the nation exists not only in so far as its individual members understand their relationship to their nation as one in which they belong to a historically shaped community, but more than that it is also expected that they identify with the abstract construct of a nation as a cultural value. This assumption was taken for granted in the past. To what extent does it also apply in the present? It is the relationship to the nation as an abstract value community that today may be at risk of being disrupted or eroded. The reason the nation as a value community is so fragile and vulnerable today is because its existence depends on a certain level of cultural knowledge being shared by all of the population and on the active and nationally engaged leadership of elites, who are mobilised by their education in the humanities.

If the population does not possess an adequate level of education, it will be unable to resist being manipulated by the media, which opportunistically

presents the nation in a negative rather than a positive light in relation to Europe. Everything then depends on how active the elites are, those who should be but often are not the main vehicles by which the nation's value meaning is communicated.

Where does the risk lie? If the relationship were to be disrupted or even destroyed, in the extreme case, the nation on the level of an abstract community of values could lose its cultural essence. In the eyes of the members of 'its' social group, the nation would cease to exist as an entity invested with values and moral imperatives. The nation would continue to exist, however, as a social community, especially since it has usually been cemented together in the form of a political institution – that is, the nation-state.

What would the consequences of this be? Even though the European nation-states (i.e. their elites) would be officially defined as a civic community, their inhabitants would usually understand themselves as members of a nation, but without feeling any commitment to the nation as an abstract community of values. The ideologues of European unification were originally guided by the noble aim of seeking to prevent any further outbreaks of venomous nationalism, which they rightly blamed for the horrors of both the First and the Second World War. Across most of Europe, they asserted the view that civil society assumes primacy over the national society. This opinion was taken to be axiomatic, as the only politically correct concept, and as the basic principle of European unification. However, what they did not realise, or rather did not want to admit, is that the nation exists in two senses – in the sense of an abstract value and in the concrete sociological sense. That is because they shared, or uncritically accepted, the erroneous idea that a nation (irrespective of which one) is nothing more than a construct created by 'nationalists'. And as a construct and the source of evil nationalism, it had to be marginalised and 'deconstructed'.

The main aim became that of advancing 'education for citizenship' among the members of a nation in the sense of a social group. Coupled with neoliberal individualism, this education achieved unquestionable success in that it came even to question the very point of the existence of the nation. Yet, given the lamentable state that education in the humanities is in present times, it is understandable that many adherents of European unification ignored the second sense of national existence – the nation as a cultural value.

Everyday empirical experience demonstrates that nations never ceased to exist as social structures. Nevertheless, how can the idea of the nation survive in the minds of people who have become, or rather were taught to become, not members of a nation but citizens of a state? Why should it survive? As the image of the nation fades as a cultural ideal, and as an abstract community, its members, above all its intellectual elites, will also lose the conviction or feeling that they have a commitment to this nation as a whole and as a value.

It is difficult to replace the motivation that exists in a person's voluntary commitment to the nation of which they are a member with the 'obligatory' commitment of a citizen to a state. The state is just a large number of citizens

living together. It can and must offer its citizens the best possible services: safety in the streets, good roads, good schools and so forth. However, I do not know if the state can for citizens assume the role or position of a nation as an abstract community of values with the ability to motivate them emotionally to act beyond the sphere of profit and material advantages.

Why should a citizen make a sacrifice for the state, which is an institution and neither a cultural value nor an object of pride; a sacrifice on the level of that made by the citizens' forebears on behalf of the nation as an abstract value? Yet, almost everywhere in modern-day Europe, states are nation-states, so we are almost everywhere witnesses to a significant hypocrisy: officially, the state seems to speak to its citizens, but in reality, it turns to them as members of a nation in its sense as a social group. This is obvious to everyone, but it is not politically correct to say so openly. However, can the state pass itself off as a medium that can be invested with national values?

Today, we would likely find that a great many and perhaps most members of the Czech, German or Danish nations have no interest in the legacy or heritage of their national culture, do not consider knowing their national history to be important, and if they do, it often some involves disparaging the main figures in that history.

Were there to occur a depreciation of this abstract community in its value sense, then understandably, the willingness, and probably also the ability, to do something on behalf of or to benefit this community beyond what is legally required of citizens (but not of members of a nation) would vanish too. Who today would be willing to sacrifice their position in society or even lay down their life for their state in order to fight against occupation by a foreign state-nation, especially if their civic rights remained intact? Who would be willing to make a sacrifice in the struggle against the risk of losing their national language if they were guaranteed the same standard of living anyway?

Is Europe's fragmentation into numerous small nations not then a pointless luxury? If we regard the path to nation formation to have been an 'error of history', which is how it is sometimes seen, then the question needs to be asked: Was it really in the interest of the creation of civil society to fight against the Napoleonic occupation of Europe at the start of the nineteenth century? If we believe that the principle of citizenship overrides the principle of the nation, then the idea of a unified, civic, monolingual French Napoleonic Europe looks like the most rational development in the modernisation of our continent, and therefore as an alternative to the formation of the nations of Europe.

The nation on the wane

If we find that the relationship of a nation's members to their nation as a value is weakening, this is not just the result of 'civic education'; it is also a consequence of the anti-humanities technocratic concept of curricular and extra-curricular education overall. Let us try to test the following hypothesis: The

axiom that the ‘civic principle’ is incompatible with national identity is difficult to prove, and if it is asserted in practice, then this is made possible by the decline of education in the humanities. Owing to the decline of the humanities, most members of the nation in its sense as a social group, and its educated elites as well, are losing or have already lost the elementary knowledge that is required to maintain tradition and national culture, as they have ceased to consider it a value.

The nation continues, however, to exist as a ‘sociological fact’, and its members have the need to belong somewhere and to identify with something. There is still the expectation that belonging to a nation is of some utility or at least pleasure to its members. The most striking way in which it is possible to provide this pleasure and to strengthen a deflated national identity, and to do so at little cost or sacrifice, is through sports. There is no special form of education required to provide this sense of satisfaction; it is enough for the media to engage in manipulation. As a result, the need for educated elites in national life decreases – as does their responsibility.

This is not merely about the experience people have when they personally attend a sporting event. Information about these events enters the system of communication that connects citizens – the nation’s members. That information thereby becomes a new type of ‘code’, in that it replaces the old cultural codes. These cultural codes are now disappearing or have almost entirely disappeared already, in part as a result of the fragmentation of cultural life. There are almost no artistic works, events or figures in national cultural life anymore that become part of the general discourse because they are recognised and personally embraced by the majority of citizens.

This is another reason why sports serve as an ‘essentialistic’ way in which to demonstrate that the consciousness of belonging to a nation as a social group has survived. Nevertheless, in the new circumstances, it is no longer associated with positive cultural values and has instead become a value-neutral phenomenon and lives on more as an awareness of an affiliation or tie that is usually not joined to a notion of commitment or service. This is a clear signal of the new role or content of national identity: ever increasingly members of a nation in its sense as a really existing group do not regard their belonging to a nation as a shared value or a commitment, but rather foremost expect some kind of benefit or utility from belonging to it. They want to *live off* the national community but are not willing to *live for* it. This may take the form of some material benefit – for instance, it may offer protection in the form of a ‘national market’ or ‘national competitiveness’, or it may ensure the provision of safety or some form of prestige – such as the sense of joy experienced after witnessing the nation win some sporting event. In this, however, the concept of a nation comes to resemble the concept of a state. And like a state, the nation is then looked on primarily as an institution that provides its members with services.

Belonging to a community, or simply belonging ‘somewhere’, is or used to be regarded as an anthropological constant. However, because most members

of a nation are denied access to a ‘patriotic education’, the idea of a nation as a value that should be cultivated is increasingly alien to its members. Among a large segment of the nation’s members, therefore, their relationship to the nation is embodied in simple slogans – such as ‘my nation first and foremost’, ‘the Czech lands for the Czech people’, ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ or ‘America first’. In many cases, the same people, who at this level declare their love for the nation, neglect or even reject principles of solidarity with the nation as an abstract community, refusing to support the welfare state, progressive taxation, financial support for the conservation of cultural monuments, etc.

In an atmosphere of general uncertainty, which can easily be evoked and manipulated by the ‘populist’ media, it is not hard for the self-proclaimed ‘tribunes of the people’, who launch their appeals to the nation and its interests, to win the sympathy and support of this segment of the nation. They do not do this, however, in order to summon them to work selflessly on behalf of their homeland, but to demand more and more new benefits from the nation – or, more accurately, from the nation-state. If the understanding of the nation as a cultural value is lost, patriotism disappears too, and the door then swings open to the rise of simple-minded nationalism.

Who is to blame for this? Is it just those populists who ‘seduce’ the people? I do not think so. A co-responsibility for this is borne by those who complain the most about the rise of primitive nationalism, and that is the intellectuals (including EU-ideologists) who created the space for this nationalism (and may sometimes even have provoked it) by one-sidedly and blindly assigning primacy to ‘citizenship’ over patriotism, and who have been unable to distinguish between nationalism and patriotism. They are the ones who, in their embrace of individualistic liberalism, contributed the most to deconstructing identification with the nation as a commitment and a value. In this we have before us a textbook example of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

There is thus no doubt that the ‘nation’ in the sense of a social group can exist even when it is not explicitly tied to the nation as a cultural construct. We can observe again and again efforts to strengthen the national self-awareness of the members of a nation as a social group, without this being based on a revival of the idea of a nation as an abstract value community and as something that has to be cultivated. Instead, it is the egoistic instincts of the individual that are demagogically appealed to, instincts such as xenophobia and racism, and this is where the risk of waves of nationalistic group passions resides, the aim of which will be not to serve the nation in the sense of a cultural or civic value, but to assert the interests of a group beneath the guise of so-called national interests. This can occur both within the national community and in relation to other nations.

On the other hand, it is important to realise that upon attaining statehood, the nation-state’s independence or autonomy very quickly became a part of the nation as an abstract value. Although cultural values in the proper sense of the word are fading from this abstraction, the value of ‘independence’ or ‘autonomy’ remains.

Let us ask a question from the opposite angle: Can the nation as an abstract cultural value exist when most members of a nation as a social group do not know or recognise the nation in this sense? Here, there are some grounds to be optimistic.

The nation in its abstract sense – as an idea and a cultural value – endures wherever even a small minority of members of the social group acknowledge it. It survives partly in the minds and in the thinking of this minority among elites, but above all in the enormous potential of cultural wealth that resides in writings, monuments, documents and works of art and science. It is a question whether there is still any theoretical hope for some kind of new ‘national revival’ – in the sense of a reactivation of national values that are maintained as intellectual potential or resources.

If this reactivation does not, however, occur, what will happen is that the nation in the sense of an abstract community will cease to hold any cultural value, and the nation in the sense of a social group will become just a collective of people who speak the same language and are citizens of the same state, which happens to be labelled as a nation. Why should these people maintain or even cultivate this language that has become just an instrument of communication and has ceased to be a value in itself, and has even lost its function as a symbol of the abstract cultural community? How can ordinary citizens accept literature as a value when they have almost entirely given up reading?

The question that must be asked then is: under what conditions might members of a group be united by the belief that, since they belong to the same nation, they have a common interest that can be called a national interest? That, however, is a question that deserves its own separate treatment.

Wherever the construct of the nation as an abstract community sees the loss of the traditional idea of service on behalf of the nation, as a part of humanity, what is left behind is an empty term into which it is possible to project xenophobia and so forth, and thus open the doors to nationalism. In other words, as the designation for an abstract community of values, the term nation will not disappear altogether, but it will transform, because the members of a nation need something to be proud of. The object of their pride may, however, be phenomena that have nothing in common with the cultural community. The nation as a cultural community thereby becomes an empty term and may even degenerate into a tool for a campaign of nationalist hate. The hope remains, however, that this dangerous tendency may at least be curbed or constrained if the elites nurture national identity towards patriotism instead of scorning patriotism. It is fitting here to recall Tom Nairn’s well-known metaphor about the two faces of Janus – the nation, and identity with it, can show not just its positive patriotic face but also its hateful and negative nationalistic face.

As a result of all this, the nation today is becoming something different from what the nation was in the traditional sense of the word during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and this difference should be respected even where it is the object of empirical research. With some exaggeration, it could

be said that the 'modern nation' whose origins I studied no longer actually exists today.

Concluding remarks

I seek here to draw attention to the fact that to reduce the current issue of the nation to just the objective of eliminating so-called nationalism means entering a vicious circle and just tilting at windmills. The problem is much more complicated and one that we will only be able to analyse in a qualified way if we set out from the position that we must begin by first examining the object of nationalism, i.e. the nation, as (both) a construct and a reality. We also have to keep in mind the well-known but almost forgotten fact that this is a phenomenon that we encounter on two interconnected levels: in the sense of a large social group of citizens and in the sense of an abstract community of cultural values. And here, it does not matter whether it is a nation-state or a nation without a state that we are considering.

This distinction could be very useful as a basis for further research on 'nationalism' and could provide insight into new aspects of the problem. Naturally, such an approach must take into account that the nation as an abstract community is in a historical perspective a genuinely European phenomenon.

I consider it unproductive to set the 'principle of nationality' in opposition to the civic principle. The state has a mission as an institution that provides its citizens with services; it asks of them that they obey its laws, and it offers guarantees of safety and the observance of their rights. Unlike the nation, however, the state is above all a collection of citizens, whom it provides with services and an administrative structure, and usually, it is not interested in giving shape to emotional ties or in reviving a historical consciousness of age-old belonging.

It says something that we speak about civil rights and obligations in the relationship between the individual and the state; but in the relationship between the individual and the nation, we expect a relationship of commitment, solidarity and responsibility. Simply put, the state is expected to provide, but the nation is something that must be worked for. Both entities – state and nation – indisputably have their own historically validated function in the life of people.

Our current experience shows, however, that the nation as a sociological fact that exists as a social group cannot be done away with by dissolving it within a civic community called the state. The more the nation in the sense of a social group loses its ties to the nation as an abstract value community, the greater the danger that the advocates of aggressive, primitive nationalism will make headway with their message among citizens. Should we respect the activities of those advocating nationalism as the work of people who are trying to revive national self-awareness and assert the postulates of patriotism? Given that I consider the process of the decline of education, discussed above, as

irreversible, I question how successful even the most well-intentioned attempts to revive healthy, unaggressive national awareness could be, the reason being that these efforts cannot rely on people's identification with the nation as a value.

Attempts to strengthen identification with the nation that are not based on understanding and embracing the nation as a cultural value harbour within themselves the danger that they will actually strengthen the opposite tendency: the rise of group egoism, the rise of nationalism in the proper sense of the word. For this reason, I fear that attempting to strengthen national awareness or consciousness among young people will not turn them into patriots, willing to work selflessly for the benefit of their nation and its culture, but will instead produce superficial blusterers or braggarts along the lines of football fans.

Even if some government or cabinet were to decide to embark on this path towards the revival of the humanities, it would fail. Nowadays, the people capable of teaching this are almost extinct. One of the reasons for this is that for decades, the only acceptable form of school education has been the acquisition of practical skills that are useful 'for life'. This dogma, supported by the Bologna system, is almost unshakable, especially in the age of digital learning, and as a result, the attempts to revive the idea of the nation as a value have a minuscule chance of success. This observation may sound optimistic to our postmodernists and technocrats for its promise of liberation from the burden of the national past and of opening the gates to the digitised and globalised idyll of future times of an economically united Europe. However, they need to realise that, as I have already pointed out, the destruction of the nation in the sense of a cultural value is counterproductive, because the consequence of this will not be the end of primitive nationalism, but, on the contrary, the strengthening of it. We are already experiencing this today: among a growing segment of the nation as a social group primitive slogans have taken the place of cultural values. Were a serious crisis to occur, it would be almost impossible to prevent an explosion of nationalism.

Translation Robin Cassling