



Science or Politics? Reflections on the Concept of Nation

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Abstract. There is no single state in Europe that is not based – in a way or another – on the principle of nationality. In different places, in different historical periods nationalism was, and is, present in various forms. I try to demonstrate that the term ‘nation’ hinders much more social analysis, as it helps. The adjectives – political, ethnic, cultural, civic, eastern, western, etc. – do not clarify anything, even more they mislead theoretical thinking and empirical analysis. The issue of definition of the nation is not only a scientific issue, but a political one too. The real question of social sciences targets the way societies transform and institutionalize. Even the most sophisticated definition of the nation (if possible), the most perfect typology does not help us in understanding the ongoing social processes (globalization, EU enlargement, etc.). The main reason is that the nation is a static term, imagined as something really existing.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, science

Questions regarding the definition of nation have a very long history. The first attempts to define the nation can be dated to the middle of the 19th century. Even if the term was employed earlier, no definition with scientific intent can be recorded.

After the breakdown of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe, a new debate has arisen. Social scientists focused foremost on explaining post-communist nationalism. Later, at the end of the millennium, kin-state activity brought into the light again debates on the definition of nation. Is the nation political or cultural, which would be the definition states should adopt,

and – not least – who, and based on which criteria, belongs or does not belong to a nation.

Ever since the signing of the peace treaties that put an end to World War I, minority rights and the settlement of minority questions have been a constant problem on the international agenda. Looking at the issue in retrospect, it might sound quite surprising that the concept of nation, especially the dilemma of a clear-cut definition, only raised public attention in the late 20th century. This process was launched by a debate that evolved around the internationalization of the Hungarian status law. The legal and public debate in Hungary touched upon the definition of the Hungarian nation itself. The conflict with neighboring countries such as Romania and Slovakia put the question of nation into the limelight. The last attempt to define nation on European level was made by a report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.¹

If we analyze the problem deeper, we have to see that both science and politics are engaged in the game of defining nation. The issue of the definition of nation is not only a scientific issue, but a political one, too. Moreover, it seems that science has misplaced the emphasis: for a century or more social scientists attempted to define the nation, however – at least this is my point – the definition of nation is not a crucial social scientific question! The real question of social sciences target how societies transform and institutionalize. Our main interest is how we can describe and interpret social change. For this we need concepts, and one of these concepts is the *nation*. Nation is regarded as a central concept, what – in my view – is at least problematic. I consider that the central concept should be nationalism, and we should interpret nationalism as a neutral concept that describes the institutionalization of societies on national basis, recalling the nation as a central value.

It is worth reconsidering what has been written on the concept of nation since the first attempts to define and typologize it. One must not forget that the article of Ernest Renan is an answer to the German historians who legitimized the conquest of Alsace-Lorraine, invoking the objective elements that may define a nation. Renan's answer is built on the subjective element of a definition, but one has not to forget that his main goal was to delegitimize the conquest. We may say that one of the first debates on the definition of nation was not of scientific but of political interest.

Nationalism, as a perpetual project, institutionalizes the polity invoking the nation and involves a permanent definition and redefinition of boundaries.

¹Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: The concept of “nation” Recommendation 1735 (2006). Text adopted by the Assembly on 26 January 2006 (7th Sitting).

Since modernity, societies are institutionalized on a national basis, which is valid for both majorities and minorities. In Europe arguably everyone is nationalized. In Ernest Gellner's words: modern man is nationalist, and he/she is nationalist because he/she has to be. Nationalism is more than discourse or ideology, it is also institutionalization: a definition with consequences for the organization of society.

The modern state is the protagonist of nationalism, and minorities answer with the same means. We hardly can encounter any group in Europe that does not define itself in national terms.

Tom Nairn's remark shows how central nationalism is in the contemporary world: "[Gellner] demonstrated how industrialization produced modern political nationalities; yet did not go on to suggest that the true subject of modern philosophy might be, not industrialization as such, but its immensely complex and variegated aftershock - nationalism." (Naim 1997: 1)

Nationalism, according to most scholars, came into being in the 18-19th centuries. Since then societies have been organized based on the principle of nationality. The invocation of "nation" is perhaps the main legitimizing principle. Nationalism is inherently related to culture. Nationalism comes into being when culture replaces structure (Gellner 1983). George Schöpflin states: "All cultures are collective; they include and exclude; they give us a particular set of identities; they allow us to make sense of the world; they offer us collective regulation and collective forms of knowledge; and they are bounded. These boundaries may shift but they will not vanish. They protect the culture in question and act as a filter through which new ideas are received and integrated. In addition, all cultures rely on broadly similar mechanisms to keep themselves in being. If threatened, they will redouble their efforts to protect cultural reproduction." (Schöpflin 2006)

Nationalism emerged first in Western Europe as a consequence of major transformations, explained differently by the major authors. Gellner considers that nationalism is the outcome of the transition from agrarian society to industrial society, (Gellner 1983) while Benedict Anderson detects the emergence of national consciousness – the nation as an imagined community – as a result of the "convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language". (Anderson 1983) In all these cases a new legitimation of the state occurred by institutionalizing nationalism as a principle of organizing society. Since nationalism emerged, the organization of societies is (also) based on the principle of nationality. In this respect, we may consider every European society as being nationalist. In the age of modernization, states tended to homogenize ethnically their societies, doing this in various ways. Eugene

Weber, in his famous book, describes the way France linguistically (and nationally) homogenized the inhabitants of the country. Similar processes can be observed in other parts of Europe.

States, societies and culture became increasingly institutionalized. The standardization of language, the creation of high culture, the introduction of compulsory education and the nationalization of culture served the titular nation. Non-dominant ethnic groups intended to create their own nation, with leaders from that particular nation, and intended to have their own state. The nationalists' programs and projects of nation-building/nationalizing usually were formulated and made in opposition to dominant groups/nations and other nationalizing processes. That is the reason why one can speak about ancient hatreds, old and lasting conflicts. The change of state authority, of borders, created newer and newer frameworks, the former masters became servants and usually experienced similar treatment to what they had been responsible for when they had been the masters. The breakdown of empires, the division of states, and transitions reconfigured political power and offered new frameworks for nationalist politics.

According to Walker Connor, in Europe there are only two ethnically homogeneous states: Ireland and Portugal. (Connor 1994) All the other states include national minorities or ethnic groups. The majority of the European states have co-nationals living in other states. This is due to the peculiarity of European history. Those states that have co-nationals (kin-minorities) in other states have adopted a policy that supports – financially, culturally, or even politically – their kin-minorities. The support of kin-minorities is based on the idea of the nation as an ethno-cultural entity, not on the political conception of it. It is assumed that the co-nationals have, or should have a special relation with the kin-state. The historical process of nation-formation can easily explain this, from the 18th century on. Nations have been formed and have been institutionalized. A sense of national identity emerged within the population usually due to the (often painful and aggressive) process of nation-building. Forging the nation, (Colley, 1992) nationalizing culture (Löfgren 1989) and fabricating heritage (Lowenthal 1998) are the concepts scholars use to describe the process of national/ethnic homogenization. The French process of making Frenchmen from peasants, (Weber 1979) the Scandinavian culture-builders (Frykman-Löfgren 1987) and the politics of the Polish nationalizing state all reflect the state-driven nationalizing processes. In the 19th and 20th centuries such politics created the modern European nation-states. A strong sense of national identity developed within the national groups in this way. Standardization of the language, official culture, mass-education and ethnic cleansing

led to further homogenization and strengthened the significance of national identity.

The history of nationalism in East-Central Europe can be best understood if we analyze the different – i.e., of the majority and of the minority – nation-building, or nationalizing processes. An important role in the nationalizing process of the national minority is played by the external national homeland. As the borders of states have often changed, different groups have experienced at different times the assimilationist or dissimilationist politics of the titular nation. In other words, they were the suffering subjects of nation-building processes, frequently with disastrous outcomes. A description of such policies is presented by Michael Mann, and a theoretical account (Mann 1999: 18-45) describing the mechanisms is offered by John McGarry – the settlement of majority groups in peripheral regions inhabited by minorities, relocation of minority groups within the state and expulsion of minorities from the state. (McGarry 1998: 613-638) Basically, every national minority which was once a component of the majority nation, or expressed nation-building goals within the new state, or at least showed a danger regarding the nation-building/nationalizing of the majority, experienced one or several of the processes described.

One possible approach to national conflicts in Eastern Europe is to stress the parallel and often conflicting processes of nation-building. Once the ideal of nation becomes important, there does not seem to be any sign that it will lose its significance. Nationalism may be transformed, but it remains an important organizational principle in our world. Nationalist politics is oriented partially on the strengthening of boundaries of the titular/majority nation, and by more or less hostile politics against national minorities.

As we see, for most scholars of nationalism, the crucial question is how and when nationalism emerged. We rarely find definitions on nation in the works of the major scholars. This suggests – at least in my opinion – that one may analyze the social processes without defining nation. We have to start scholarly encounters with understanding the social processes and not the other way around: with the definition of the nation. Gellner and Hobsbawm both consider that nationalism created the nation. In this way, the nation is the result of nationalization, basically the outcome of the institutionalization of the society on national basis, or – in other words – the result of socialization on national basis. From this perspective it is indifferent whether a particular nation is cultural or political. It depends on the way how the state or the political elite shaped its politics.

However, we have to go further. In my essay, I am going to ask the inevitable question whether the concept of nation has ever been a scientific issue or it

emerged as a political one since the first definition of nation appeared. The problem remains in what theoretical framework and with which scientific means questions related to the nation could be analyzed, especially those with respect to status law and the referendum on dual citizenship. First of all, one has to emphasize that we analyze not a scientific question but a political process in which the definition of nation has been given a central role. Our research question could refer to what a nation really is, how it could be defined and how a typology of nations could be constructed. I use the conditional here since in my opinion, as opposed to numerous experts, the definition of nation has never been a question of (social) science. We can also add that a precise scientific definition of nation or a precise typology would not get us closer to a better understanding of social and political processes, either.

The definition of a certain nation has political consequences as a given state institutionalizes its society and defines its relations to minorities living within its borders and fellow nationals living beyond its borders based on a concept that the state itself accepts. This has far-reaching political consequences. The attitude of a state to its own national question has different outcomes based on whether the concept of political or cultural nation is used as a starting point. According to the cultural identity/definition, a nation involves those living outside the borders of a given state as well, taking them to belong to the majoritarian/titular nation, but this also implies that minorities that live on the territories of this state are not part of that particular nation. The political definition regards people living in one state as the members of the nation, namely all citizens living on state territory, independent from ethnic or national origin. Those living beyond the borders of the majoritarian/titular nation are, however, not part of this particular nation. Based on the criteria of scientific thinking, the concept of nation of a given state should be coherent. Law also demands a similar coherence as harmony should prevail amongst laws of a state, as a matter of principle. Political practice offers a different picture. We can notice that the relation of states towards minorities living on state territories and fellow nationals defies any scientific criteria or legal coherence.

Those who claim that nationalism appeared *again* after the regime changes in the region are fundamentally wrong. Nationalism has always been present in Western Europe as much as in Central-Eastern Europe. Politicians of the regime changes did not use nation-based state reunification as a political slogan, one can only find some references to the overall respect of the rights of national and ethnic minorities. In the light of the above, it might have seemed surprising that a nationalist rhetoric overwhelmed the public sphere only few months after the regime changes. The birth of democratic institutions have

fuelled intense debates in some states, while others shared a common understanding towards the national self-identification of states and rights to be given to or taken away from minorities.

It is obvious that post-communist societies, Western European politicians and opinion-maker (elites) were shocked by the emergence of nationalist rhetoric in the public sphere, and the wars in Yugoslavia and conflicts following the breakup of the Soviet Union were often labelled ‘ethnic’. These were all part of the transition process. Every social transition and revolution, may it be velvet or bloody, is accompanied by a political restructuring along national lines. It was not only the democratic institutions, market economy etc. that had to be created, an answer regarding the national characteristics of a state had to be constructed as well. The re-definition of a state does not only mean that, from today on, the former communist/socialist state will be a market economy and the former one-party system will be a multi-party system etc. The state, previously calling itself socialist, that managed to solve the minority question had to face the fact that national minorities became more engaged on its territory and it had to accept that a decisive part of the political elite belonging to the majority (sometimes its defining majority) wished to continue nation-building that was defined as “unfinished”.² Regardless whether this process involved alterations to the old constitutions or constitutional national assemblies that edited a new constitution, the political elite had to provide a political answer concerning the rights to be given to national identities, what its stance towards fellow nationals living beyond its borders was and, last but not least, what the national self-determination would look like. The vast majority of states in the region opted for a “nation-state” identity and politics. (Culic 2003: 38-58) One can hardly find a state in Europe where the problem of national minority does not figure at least occasionally on the political agenda. The protection of national minorities and the definition of national/ethnic minorities have not until recently been linked to the issue of the definition of motherland and of nation itself. From the viewpoint of a researcher, this is a clear misunderstanding of the problem, from a political standpoint, however, the linkages are easy to construct. Social sciences investigate the evolution of nationalism and the organization of (majoritarian and minoritarian) societies on a national basis,

²These are exactly the reasons why Central-Eastern European left-wing parties face issues related to nation, since antinationalist politics (or political rhetorics) was deeply embedded in successor parties as well. It lasts until recent days despite the fact that a part of today's left-wing political elite does not claim any continuity with the socialist party. The other reason why the left-wing has a hard time conceptualising its nation concept is that it was mainly ‘pre-reserved’ by the left-wing.

while politics seeks solutions to given questions. Politics on minority protection in the EU that are based on governmental considerations do not approach minority rights from the standpoint of minorities but look at stability first. (Kymlicka 2004; Majtényi 2004)

For about one or two centuries, literature on the concept of nation has been trying to define what a nation really is, but the attempt has constantly ran into some methodological obstacles. The way Daniele Conversi puts it is very precise: ‘Nationalism is both a process of border maintenance and creation. Hence, it is a process of definition. One of the problems stemming from the lack of a universally acceptable definition of the nation and of nationalism derives precisely from the fact that the nation is itself a tool of definition’. (Conversi 1977: 77) Scholarly questions, on the other hand, refer to the description of processes and finding the most appropriate theoretical framework for their analysis: in my view, this framework is best called nationalism and nation-building. We can only agree with Rogers Brubaker, who draws our attention to the fact that “We should not ask ‘what is a nation’ but rather: how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? How does nation work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? What makes the use of that category by or against states more or less resonant or effective? What makes the nation-evoking, nation-invoking efforts of political entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?” (Brubaker 1996: 16) If we accept therefore that our questions do not refer to the nation but to social processes, national typology becomes a secondary question. Brubaker mainly states, and we have all reasons to agree, that social processes can be understood even without the real definition of nation. Nation is only interesting regarding the nation concept based on which the given state institutionalizes its society and regulates relations between fellow nationals within and beyond the borders. In this respect, we can already talk about politics resting *on a political and/or cultural concept of the nation* and about politics institutionalized according to these. In order to find out which national concept a state prefers, one has to look at the constitution, the law on citizenship and the laws applied to fellow nationals.³

The history and political practice of nationalism is the *politics of acceptance and discrimination*. The definition of nation is the *result of and not the reason for this process*. Nationalism, as a value-neutral and process-descriptive scientific concept, can also be defined as a political fight for the official determination of what the nation is (and the political practice stemming from this

³Party laws and laws for education and culture can serve as further reference.

fight). The concept of nation and the settlement of the relation between nation and state changes depending on the way a certain political party/side/ideology defines those who belong to the nation and those to be discriminated. This intention can be traced in the constitution, the citizenship law, the minority law, the ‘status law’ and laws related to education, culture etc. The nation concept of a certain state can basically be excellently derived from these laws and regulations.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, social sciences regarded the definition of nation as a central problem. The theory of Ernest Gellner has pointed out that the central concept of social sciences is *nationalism*, not *nation*. That is when emphasis was transferred from the definition of the “real essence” of nation and nation typologies to the analysis of social institutionalization. The problematic nature of any definition of the nation had already revealed itself in the nineteenth century, leading many scholars to try to specify the concept by linking nation and nationalism with a given characteristic. That is how classical typologies that still have not lost their political power were born. Concerning typologies, the debate is mainly about whether objective or subjective features are decisive in delineating a nation. Approaches in favor of the definitive nature of objective factors list culture, language or religion as national characteristics. They further suppose, however, that the mere existence of these objective criteria does not alone generate a certain national identity. Subjective approaches, not denying the importance of certain objective characteristics, look at belonging to a nation as the most important thing: one can only talk about a nation when the ones belonging to it claim and feel that they are part of that. It is without a doubt necessary to have some kind of objective features, but we do not find any that would satisfy the needs of a theoretical definition. The debate between these two preconceptions is the centerpiece of Ernest Renan’s classical study. (Renan 1995) This essay is regarded as the first formulation of the objective and the subjective definition of nation. Although the terminology changed, the debate still raged on amongst various representatives of sciences. Renan was contributing to the Franco-German historical debate following the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and argued that the occupied territories belonged to France⁴. In the debate,

⁴See more details: Finkielkraut, Alain: *A gondolkodás veresége*. [The Defeat of the Mind] Budapest: Osiris, 1996. 39-47. Pokol, Béla: A nemzet fogalmának ártértelemezése? [Reinterpreting the concept of nation?] In *Médiahatalom*. Budapest: Windsor, 1995. Ádám, Péter: Renan nemzetfelfogása: Elzász-Lotharingiától a nemzeti önrendelkezésig, [The nation concept of Renan: From Alsace-Lorraine to national self-determination] In *Mi a nemzet?* Budapest: Akadémiai, 1998. Smith, Anthony D.: Nationalism and the Historians. *International*

all arguments are listed that are also typical of later interpretations and definition attempts. It is therefore important to note that the first debate on the real nature of nation is not a scientific but a political one about a province changing hands! Friedrich Meinecke, (Meinecke 1970,10) Hans Kohn, (Kohn 1994: 162-165) John Plamenatz (Plamenatz 1973: 23-36) all offer different typologies that are actually based on the same thought. They differentiate between political and cultural, Western and Eastern and civil and ethnic nations. We also have to see that their arguments rest on strong normative presumptions. The “good” and “right” political nation is opposed to the “inappropriate” and “bad” cultural nation and nationalism. All these typologies were created when there was no theory available to explain the evolution of nationalism⁵. Alain Dieckhoff defines civil and cultural nation preconceptions as follows: the “civic, contractual, elective nation is the basis of the French idea of the nation, conceptualized by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and realized by the Great Revolution. In contrast, the second type is seen as the concretization of a historical community, the expression of an identity feeling, the reflection of a natural order. This cultural, organic, ascriptive nation is the basis of the German idea of the nation, nurtured by romanticism and embodied by the Second and the Third Reich.” (Dieckhoff 2005) The latter approach defines nation along ethnocultural lines, puts the emphasis on common language and culture, while the previous one regards those living in the same country belonging to the nation. These typologies listed above merely try to clear up the concept of nation that is hard to grasp as a category of social science. Constructing typologies does not bring us closer to the essence of the problem. We might say that these typologies cause more trouble than actually help in interpreting the question. On the one hand they confirm that the nation is a central category, an actual identity, on the other hand they create a simplistic category that obstructs scientific considerations on the question⁶. No matter how many social phenomena are used to clarify the two concepts, it does not bring us closer to the understanding of the political process itself.

It is by all means more productive to analyze nationalism and nationalisms, namely the processes of institutionalization since social transformation and various governmental, minority, home land politics become more understand-

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⁵I do not mean that we have a coherent nationalism theory approved by social sciences, only that those who created the typology, especially according to the recent stance of science, did not understand essential questions concerning nation and the evolution of nationalism.

⁶Naturally, contemporary literature questions the use of the cultural vs. political dichotomy, but oddly, this theory has not yet spread in Western social scientific mindset.

able⁷. Instead of using various typologies as a scheme, it would be more fruitful to investigate the evolution of a certain nationalism, a concept of nation that explains why the state prefers this or the other approach. It is almost obvious why a nationalism that is a result of a social transformation rather approaches the political model and why a nation-building that is initiated from above and puts its own language and culture to the central place stands closer to the cultural model.

Although nation is often the subject of social scientific analysis, in my view, purely concentrating on nation does not bring us closer to the analysis of social transformation and political processes. It is almost nonsense to describe a given nation as a political or a cultural one, but nationalism as an institutionalization process can be examined with the help of these categories. This can be done by examining which concept of nation political actors refer to, more precisely, based on which concept of nation they wish to institutionalize society. We can get closer to the understanding of the national policy of a given state by examining law, political statements, and political activity, and, if we wish to, we can then decide whether a certain policy is closer to the cultural or rather to the political ideal type. Hungarian domestic debates can be analyzed very well in this framework. We have no reason to assume that the international debate is not political and that it is not about the European definition of nation and nationality.

Conclusions

In this paper I attempted to show that it is not only contemporary debates on the concept of nation that are political in nature, but in fact, ever since the beginning of such enterprises, defining the nation has been a political question. I tried to demonstrate that this is not a question of social science but a political debate underpinned by arguments from social science. Since a given definition of nationhood has political consequences, it is not neutral for politics which concept of the nation is used to institutionalize society and

⁷It has to be detected behind the public debate of status law (and later 'dual citizenship') that it is about the national self-determination of the Hungarian state. Which one should be the legitimate nation concept along which the Hungarian state should relate towards all minorities, including those in Hungary and those beyond the borders? The central question concerns on what (national) principles the Hungarian state should define itself and Hungarians in neighbouring countries and in other parts of the world. We can understand this process in the theoretical framework of nationalism, and those approaches that put nation as the central issue of analysis are essentially wrong.

how the question of who belongs and does not belong to a certain nation is answered. A certain concept of the nation legitimizes or delegitimizes certain political acts. Social sciences can define nations, they can set up typologies, but they serve as insufficient sources for the understanding of social processes and social transformation. Political debates evolving around the definitions of nationhood and institutionalization are, as a direct consequence of the above, nothing more than the determination of what a given state accepts and what it discriminates against in terms of the identity choices of citizens. This is not a question for science, but one for politics.

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