

## Nationality and Philosophy. Some Preliminary Observations<sup>\*</sup>

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*The protean quality of nationality – the variability of its historical expressions – poses methodological and philosophical problems that likely account for much of the scholarly dispute over what and when is the nation. The primary difficulty is coming to terms with the centrality of meaning in the constitution of human associations which, in turn, poses difficulties for the historical, sociological and anthropological investigation of collective self-consciousness, requiring its own analytical approaches. Those approaches to the meaning born by symbols include renewed attention to representation, territory, and myth.*

Over the last generation or so, some clarification of the character and development of nationality has been achieved. We have a better understanding of the ethnic component of nationality, of territorial kinship, and especially of the long-term cultural and political factors that contribute to the stability of the symbolic center constitutive of a nation – a stability that seemingly distinguishes the nation from the sociologically more amorphous ethnic group. These modest advances in our understanding of nationality during this period have been a result of the renewed attention to the subject, even though expressed through numerous, sharply divergent analyses, for example, in the works of Walker Connor, John A. Armstrong, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Pierre L. van den Berghe, John Breuilly, Eric Hobsbawm, Liah Greenfeld, Dominique Schnapper, John Hutchinson and, above all, Anthony Smith (1986, 1998,

2000). Despite these advances, differences among scholars over what a nation is and its place in history continue, suggesting that problems remain for advancing our understanding of nationality.

The questions what is a nation and what is its place in history are, of course, important; and they deserve to be answered. Over the years, I have attempted to answer them. However important political developments, specifically the emergence of a state, may be for the consolidation and continued existence of a nation, I have argued that the nation should not be viewed as primarily a political instrument for the exercise of power, that is, it is not to be conceptually collapsed into a state. This is because the nation should be understood as a form of kinship, albeit a territorial kinship (Grosby, 2005, 2001). The nation is constituted out of a temporally deep, territorially delimited awareness of being related – a

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collective self-consciousness of territorial nativity. I have further argued that the nation is by no means exclusively a modern phenomenon, nor is its origin exclusively European (Grosby, 2002). There is too much historical evidence that contradicts the generally unexamined assumption that nations are exclusively modern. As important as these questions are, in this paper, rather than engage them again, I wish instead to pursue a different problem of methodological and philosophical significance. How are we to understand the very continuation of the disputes over the answers to these questions? The fact of the matter is that the differences between scholars over how to understand nationality should come as no surprise; for as Herder (1774) and scholars like Friedrich Meinecke and Hans Kohn after him have observed, nations are protean. Herein lies one reason for the difficulty in understanding nationality: its protean quality – the variation of its historical expression. What are some of the reasons that justify this observation, and what are its implications for better understanding the national question?

### Meanings and Their Variation

The variability and malleability of the characteristics of any particular nation over time and from one nation to another, conveyed by Herder's observation and attested to by an ever growing number of historical studies of particular nations, are two reasons for those problems that remain in clarifying our understanding of nationality. These problems are unavoidable. Why is this so?

Variability and malleability are features common to all forms of human association because of the unavoidable presence of a historically developing multiplicity of meanings arising out of the heterogeneous pursuits of humanity. These different meanings coalesce into a complex, are recognized, and thereby shared by a number of individuals

who by doing so constitute a bounded collectivity. Such a complex may develop a relative cohesiveness over time; and when it does, a nation may exist; but that complex is never unitary. We refer to such a bounded complex of unevenly shared, changing, and heterogeneous meanings as "culture". However commonplace these anthropological and sociological observations may be, what they indicate is this: no nation can ever be thoroughly uniform or stable as if it were made out of inanimate material and designed by engineers. The historical evidence clearly confirms the changing, shifting character of nations, both over time and from one nation to another. There, thus, can be no such thing as the "classic" form of the nation.

As a consequence of what should be an elementary recognition of this historical and sociological fact, analytical problems arise in the determination of the categorial specificity of nationality. One observes this analytical quandary through scholars' recourse to such terms as "ethnic nation", "civic nation", "protonation", and so forth. Scholars must not lose sight of the merit of Herder's observation; indeed, it must be openly acknowledged and incorporated as central to their understanding of nationality, even if, by doing so, a degree of conceptual ambiguity has to be tolerated.

The very character of a shared, but changing complex of meanings in the formation of the intersubjective world of the nation – the nation as a territorial community of collective self-consciousness – poses methodological problems. This has, of course, long been recognized, for example, in the debates at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth over the differences between the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften* involving Droysen, Windelband, Dilthey, Rickert, Meyer, Weber, Simmel, Freyer, Cassirer, Knight, Parsons, Oakeshott and many others. Although rarely recognized as such, many of the current differences between various analyses of nationality actually

represent a continuation of these earlier, methodological debates (see Smith, 1998).

All scholars of nationality obviously agree that the materials out of which nations are formed are living human beings. Thus, to say that the nation is neither made out of inanimate material nor designed by engineers may be viewed by some to be a little more than rhetorical excess in the service of erecting a straw man. Yet this is, in fact, the implication of overly deterministic, whether historical or sociobiological, accounts of nationality, where the existence of one form of the nation is presented as a necessary, uniform result of either the “historical forces” of “modernity” (as in the work of Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm) or our biological drives (as in the work of van den Berghe), and where the “engineers” are elites manipulating or inventing traditions to further one interest, for example, “power” in the form of the state, the market, or the “inclusive fitness” of kinship, depending upon the analyst. Such accounts minimize, if not altogether eliminate, what is crucial to the existence of the nation: its meaning to its members such that the nation is “a community of history and destiny”. Moreover, these accounts avoid the merit of Herder’s observation: the fact that any nation can be only *relatively* stable precisely because of this centrality of meaning to its existence.

This manifest, historical fact of relative stability, or the potential for instability, is because the meaning around which the nation is constituted: 1) emerges over time, and is seen as doing so by its members, thereby presenting the philosophical problems of the nature of tradition and its reception, specifically the character of historical consciousness; 2) as such, is susceptible to change, given the myriad problems that arise in the course of life and that require response (for example, economic adversity, war, population movements, religious conflict); 3) varies not only over time, but also from one individual to another and from one group (or region) to

another; and 4) is, in fact, a complex of heterogeneous meanings (corresponding to different pursuits or interests, for example, economic, political and religious) which exist in varying degrees of tension with one another, often are expressed as political differences (for example, over trade, immigration, church-state relations), and where at any particular point in time one of those meanings may be ascendant over the others (for example, patriotism at the outbreak of war). Such a complex of meanings can never be free from ambiguity; it is always contested. Thus, nations can only be (to resort to the title of a recent book on nationality that captures well these above observations) “zones of conflict” (Hutchinson, 2005).

These observations about the analytical problems that arise from the place of meaning in the constitution of human associations indicate that the nation, as with all “cultural forms”, is, to borrow a felicitous phrase of Cassirer (2000 [1942]: 51), an “active form of expression”, that is, the characteristic features of nationality and their institutional expressions are “processes”. It is precisely this character of being “active” that scholars of nationality must take into account, even if by doing so analytical difficulties arise, for example, tolerating ambiguities, above all, in the demarcation of the categories of one “intersubjective world” from another such as ethnic community (or “proto nation”) from nation.

## The Philosophical Problem

Both the centrality of meaning to the existence of a nation and the contingencies of its historical forms and continuation should force the analyst of the nation, as a cultural fact in space and time, to steer a course between deterministic “naturalism” and ahistorical “metaphysics”. Here is where another source of the problems for understanding better nationality exists: the

necessity for developing procedures to investigate cultural forms.

Clearly, for the social and historical sciences to be scientific, there must be a subordination of particular to universal. The most well-known attempt to do this has been Max Weber's use of "ideal types", the positing of which permits comparative analysis. Smith (2005, 98) has followed Weber by formulating a definition of the nation as a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historical homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs. This definition implies that the existence of a nation presupposes the *relative* stability (the recurrence over generations) of symbols whose referents are explicitly territorial of relatively extensive, but delimited scope. The analyst, however, must not allow this definition to lull him or her into a historiographical or sociological myopia, where an assumption renders moot investigation of evidence, because the analyst, of necessity, will be confronted with varying degrees of ambiguity in the active, processual expression of each of these characteristic components for reasons that have been previously alluded to. The "active, processual" character of all human associations that achieve stability through their continuation over time indicates that the symbolic elements central to their constitution and continuation, even though they achieve stability, are nonetheless subject to transformation as a result of the modification of the meanings borne by those symbols.

The methodological problem is that the forms of participation in a changing tradition such that a shared meaning exists is different from what occurs in the subordination of a physical fact to a natural law or – let it be emphasized – to any number of socioeconomic developments, because key to the existence of the nation is that the

subjects are aware that they are involved in actions of varying kinds that are viewed by them as common. Thus, as Cassirer (2000 [1942]: 75) observed, the wavering constancy of the shared awareness of such common actions is not one of the properties or laws of either physical objects or socioeconomic developments, but rather of *significations*.

To be sure, any number of socioeconomic, political and technological developments may facilitate the likelihood of the relative stability and shared recognition of the symbols of a common culture. Obviously, modern means of communication and democratic citizenship would do so by providing conditions for the stability of the meaningful referents of the significations or symbols; but in and of themselves such developments are not sufficient to account for the existence of a nation. Indeed, these developments may undermine the nation by creating conditions for empire that throughout history, from the Rome of Caracalla to the European Union of today, has always been an alternative to nationality. This historical ubiquity of this alternative is just one more piece of evidence against overly deterministic accounts of nationality, as the mind gravitates between the rationalistic universalism of empire and the freedom of the self-determining nation. Moreover, modern technological and political developments may not even be prerequisites for the existence of spatially extensive solidarities. One should, for example, remember that the shared understanding of the self created through the spread of the world religions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam took place in the absence of modern means of communication.

Key for the existence of a nation is the development and relative constancy of unavoidably ambiguous significations of territorial kinship that make possible involvement in actions that are viewed as being common, that is, a collective self-consciousness. These two, crucial components deserve emphasis: 1) we are dealing with the

existence and continuation of a shared awareness, of a self-designating collective consciousness; and 2) the justification of that collective self-consciousness as being distinctive, that is, delimited through focus on a temporally deep territory that implies the perception of generational succession, that is, territorial kinship. It is precisely this central problem of a shared consciousness that achieves a relative constancy through the establishment of significations that is pivotal to the study of the nation.

This recognition of the centrality of significations places the investigation of nationality within the *Geisteswissenschaften*, that is, within the study of symbolic vehicles of consciousness. To do so is, once again, most certainly not to engage in a kind of metaphysics, that is, to ignore historical contingencies, socioeconomic developments, or the biological realities of humanity within the animal kingdom. It is, however, to recognize problems of human consciousness that are *sui generis* – problems that are not to be submerged under those contingencies, developments, and realities such that they are, in effect, ignored. To refuse this recognition is to reintroduce, paradoxically, either a naturalism or a metaphysics into the analysis of nationality by riding roughshod over the historical evidence of the development of, and problems posed by, symbols, even if that is not the intention of those social scientists who seek to formulate an „operational” or „predictive model”.

### Analytical Requirements

In these preliminary observations, I will briefly allude to only a few, additional components specific to collective consciousness, its structure, and its symbolic representation, that indicate the necessity of different procedures for the investigation of nationality. Too many scholars of nationality have not paid sufficient attention to these components. Their neglect has

resulted in an incorrect appreciation of the character of nationality and its historical expressions.

### Representation

It is often assumed that in order for the *community* of the nation to exist, there must, *qua community*, be the condition and recognition of equality. This is the implication of how the categories of citizenship and „modernity” are used by many analysts of the nation, where a political, democratic equality is insisted upon for a nation to exist. It is thus concluded by such analysts that nations can only be modern. However, the assumption is incorrect.

All associations, beyond that of true friendship, of enduring, intense attachment are differentiated. All have „representatives” who serve as symbols of attachment, embodying the purposes of the association. Such symbolic representation is a necessary property of consciousness, if the latter is to be more than fleeting. For example, a father may represent a family, a chief for a tribe, a bishop for a church, a king for a kingdom, and a democratically elected president or prime minister for the modern state. However, an inegalitarian family, tribe, kingdom or religious association may also be a *Gemeinschaft* – a community of enduring and relatively intense attachments; and certainly a territorially extensive one when customs, laws, language and religion are unifying factors that further distinguish that community from another. *Pars pro toto* is a phenomenon of collective consciousness, where the sense of belonging to, of membership in, the nation is facilitated through the symbol of the representative as an object of attachment to the nation, as a referent of consciousness. The place of symbolic representation in the formation and continuation of a national collective self-consciousness has certainly been recognized by scholars of nationality; but that recognition has usually been confined to monuments and works of art.

The phenomenon of representation of the collectivity through a „representative” individual as a structural property of collective consciousness has not received proper attention in the study of nationality.

Furthermore, the historical evidence of belonging to a territorial collectivity is too rich and varied to be conflated with only one form of political participation, specifically modern expressions of democratic citizenship. To insist on such a conflation is to ignore the historical and symbolic expressions or representations of the collectivity and its self-consciousness not only in the past (for example, ancient Israel, Sri Lanka, medieval Poland and Korea, Persia), but also in the present (for example, Kurdistan). It is to ignore representation as a phenomenological property of consciousness.

### *Territory as Symbol*

Another problem is to ascertain just what is the meaning that is being designated, often ambiguously, by the symbol. For a nation to exist, there must be a symbolic representation of a territory such that, when acknowledged and thereby incorporated as part of the understanding of the self, a territorial relation, a territorial kinship, is posited over time. Historically, the shared symbolic representation of a territory that is incorporated in the understanding of the self may continue to exist in the absence of a state, for example, Poland from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A fundamental methodological error exists when the territory of a nation is taken for granted. While attachments to confined localities are often resilient because of the sustained immediacy of the individual’s relation to his or her environment, attachments to relatively extensive, yet bounded territories are only possible when the latter have become objects of contemplation through symbolic representation, facilitated, for example, through maps. The direct experience of a confined locality must be

distinguished from the experience arising out of significance attributed to a larger area, where the latter becomes a space with historical meaning: a territory. This is possible only through symbolic representation; and it is this symbolic representation that makes possible the continued existence of a nation, for example, Poland, in the absence of a state.

Philosophically, the fact of the temporal depth of the extensive, yet bounded territorial relation of a nation presupposes that symbols, once created out of the ebb and flow of life, “take on a life of their own”, that is, they can no longer be reduced to the circumstances of their creation. In this sense, the symbols are “objective”; however, they are only relatively objective, for their continued existence as symbols requires recognition (Freyer, 1998 [1928]). Once again, this subjective component of the collective self-consciousness – the requirement of recognition (affirmation) of the objective symbol – may also result, given changing historical and socioeconomic conditions, in a modification of the meaning borne by the symbol, thus, as Herder observed, the unavoidable malleability and variation of the symbolic complex of any nation. For example, the ancient Egyptian Middle/Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 BC) territorial symbol “Canaan” persisted through time, only to be incorporated and then transformed by ancient Israel, whose symbolic self-designation – Israel – while also persisting through time, in turn underwent significant modification, even to the point where it was emptied of any territorial reference, as in the “new Israel” (with its heavenly Jerusalem) of the New Testament.

To recognize the relative objectivity of symbols in no way denies the influence of historical and socioeconomic circumstances on their creation, transformation, and continued recognition; but it avoids the mistake of reducing those symbols to those circumstances. It affirms symbols as cultural resources persisting over long periods

of time, sometimes millennia, capable of both shaping and being used to shape collective responses to changing socio-economic and political circumstances; but it does not collapse the meanings borne by those symbols into those circumstances.

Despite such variation, the category of the nation, if it is to have heuristic utility, indicates the ascendancy of the recognition of kinship, both biological and territorial, and its symbols within the national cultural complex. This element of kinship is what has been referred to by Anthony Smith (1986) as the ethnic component of the nation; it is what I, following Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz, have designated as the anthropologically ubiquitous but historically modifiable “primordial” orientation – the significance attributed to nativity, both locational and lineage (Grosby, 2002). Now, to introduce ethnic relations in the formation of a nation is to raise the problem of myth.

### *Myth*

What is the place of myth in the constitution of a nation? First, myths, such as that of being a „chosen people”, provide the collectivity with justification for its distinctiveness. Second, and as the historical record shows, myths or existential ideals that are not capable of empirical verification clearly have a bearing on the orientation of action, in this instance, in the formation and continued existence of a nation. In recognizing this historical fact, the methodological tradition of Max Weber and Talcott Parsons (1954 [1938]) is reaffirmed, namely, that ideas borne by myth and religion are often factors influencing human conduct. I take for granted here that such ideas in general and myths in particular often both contain facts and convey truths about human life and its vicissitudes.

While scholars of nationality should avoid a metaphysical analysis of the nation, to do so in no way means a refusal to

acknowledge the significance of a metaphysical orientation in human action. Indeed, the implication of this acknowledgement is the recognition that a metaphysical component in human affairs is seemingly inextinguishable; humans can not live without positing a meaning to their lives, and around which those lives are organized. Historically, the primary symbolic vehicle for such a meaning is religion; and there is no period in human history without religion. Thus, and of great importance, these observations reject the naive historicism that insists upon radical, periodic disjunctions in human conduct by following Jaspers (1958, 15) in the recognition that “mythical thinking is not a thing of the past, but characterizes man in any epoch”.

However, the analytic difficulty arises out of the fact that, contrary to the deterministic accounts of human conduct, the meaning around which humans organize their actions are multiple and heterogeneous. Thus, the significance of kinship in all its historically variable forms – from the family to the nation – may exist in tension with the orientation to the sacred; it certainly does when the divine is understood to transcend this world and is universal, as in the so-called axial, world religions of Christianity and Islam. The tension is minimal when the religion is primordial, that is, territorially specific, thus abetting the existence of a nation, for example, Japanese Shintoism. For the axial, world religions, historically variable compromises between universality and primordality are observed that have contributed to the existence of a nation, for example, the “national saint” of Eastern Orthodoxy who has served as a symbol of attachment to the nation within otherwise universal Christendom. Moreover, as the forms of the primordial orientation of kinship vary, the forms of the orientation to the sacred that transcends this world are also subject to change. Once again, we are faced with the implications of the relevance of Herder’s observation.

The philosophical problem posed by nationality is: how is the distinctiveness that distinguishes one group of humans from another justified such that the understanding of the self of the collective self-consciousness persists over time? The straightforward answer is that national historiography functions to define and thereby anchor the collective self-consciousness. While this answer is true, it nonetheless begs the question, for left unanswered is the determination of the scope of the history, that is, its limit to what becomes the history of a particular nation. It is difficult to see how such a distinctiveness is to be justified other than by recourse to some kind of existential ideal that resists empirical verification, historically ranging from, for example, the covenant at Sinai for the “chosen” ancient Israel, to the Buddha’s visit to Sri Lanka, to assertions of putative descent from ancient ancestors (characteristic of so many nations), to the God-given rights of the individual of the United States of America. Is it the case that the assertion of distinctiveness requires a meaning that must be borne by a myth of some kind? Whatever the problems opened up by this question, we observe time and again for every nation the making of history more mythical and

the making of myth more historical. Such nonempirical, justificatory ideas about collective existence appear necessary for the distinctiveness of any nation.

## Conclusion

These are only a few of the important, methodological and philosophical points of departure involved in the proper study of nationality that have been too often neglected. They richly deserve greater attention and elaboration than has generally been recognized. They are: 1) the relative objectivity, hence independence, of symbols; 2) the heterogeneous character of the symbolic complex – the center – of a nation; 3) the phenomenon of representation; 4) the problem of distinctiveness; and, finally, 5) myth, both as a problem for the social sciences and as a fact of human consciousness.

The richness and complexity of the historical record require these methodological approaches with their philosophical assumptions. Only by turning to them can a more accurate understanding of nationality be achieved.

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