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## THE NATION

### 1. The origin of the term „Nation“ and the consequences of the present terminological confusion in theoretical discussion of the concept of „Nation“

In theoretical discussions of social phenomena, and of the nation in particular, numerous disturbing and often funny situations arise from the misuse of language as a means of communication.

These situations arise from the ambiguity of key terms used in the research and dissemination of ideas related to the nation, and from the ambiguity of the term „nation“ itself. These terms are often used, moreover, without any precise definition of the meaning attached to them by individual authors and particular social, class, national, cultural and other „environments“, or scientific disciplines. As a result of this terminological uncertainty and frequent confusion, the real problems are often hardly touched upon.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the established terminology tends to confuse the nation with other phenomena, in particular with the state.<sup>2</sup> The term „nation“ is so widely used in contemporary discussion to mean the state that other terms – most often the word „nationality“ (nationalite) – are frequently employed to denote what was originally understood by the term „nation“.<sup>3</sup>

The source of these difficulties lies in the very concept of „the nation“, which belongs to that group of ideas which have been perhaps least clearly and coherently defined. Indeed, one peculiarity of the concept is that the word „nation“ existed even before the formation of the communities which are defined as nations in the modern sense of the word.<sup>4</sup> On this point there is relatively broad agreement. Serious disagreement begins, however, as soon as the attempt is made to define the origin of the word „nation“. Most authors, correctly in my opinion, trace the origin of the

1 Jerzy Wiatr, Osnovni problemi teorije nacije, „Ideje“, Beograd, 6/1971, str. 23.

2 Jean Jacques Chevallier, L'idée de nation et l'état (L'idée de nation, „Presses universitaires de France“, Paris, 1969, p. 4.

3 Pierre Mauge, Contre L'Etat – nation, „Editions Denöel“, Paris, 1979, p. 50; Pierre Vilar, La Catalogne dans l'Espagne moderne, I, „Flammarion“, Paris, 1962, pp. 31–36.

4 Mario Albertini, L'idée de nation (L'idée de nation, „Presses universitaires de France“, Paris, 1969, p. 5.

word to Roman times, but some consider that it originated in the sixteenth century and only gained its modern meaning in the seventeenth century<sup>5</sup>, or, alternatively, that it originated at the start of the fifteenth century in France during the hundred years war.<sup>6</sup>

„Natio“ is a Latin word derived from the verb „nasci“ (to be born) and its participle „natus“ (born). The Latin word „natio“ implied some idea of origin which was essentially independent of individual will. The nation is a community in the sense that an individual is born within it and receives its language and customs.<sup>7</sup>

Via the Romance languages, but above all due to the fact that Latin remained the common language of the „educated“, ruling classes es throughout Europe until the eighteenth century, the term „natio“ passed into international use.<sup>8</sup>

To the Romans „natio“ meant „a foreign tribe“, and its political significance was thus linked with the principle „translitio imperii“ and the definition of Roman citizenship. The nation in this sense simply meant the origin, although in political practice ethnicity became a criterion of discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

After the great migrations of the sixth to tenth centuries there followed a period of relative stabilisation during which the differences between European communities were increasingly marked by language and customs. The word „nation“ then began to assume the meaning of a natural community occupying a definite territory. In this period the nation was generally considered as something quite distinct from power. Nationality bore little relation to politics and its requirements.<sup>10</sup>

The term „nation“ has been used in its modern sense since the fourteenth century, although it was already being used during the thirteenth century, by Dante for example, to describe groups of foreign merchants. In Universities such as Bologna, Padua and Pavia, and in the councils of the Roman Catholic Church, a „nation“ denoted a group with broadly similar linguistic or territorial origins. In Paris, for example, the University was divided into four nations of which the first three (French, Picardian and Norman) coincided exactly with the three relatively distinct cultural and ethnic „profiles“ of northern France, while the fourth, „natio anglica“, which included the English, Germans and Scandinavians, emphasised the relatively homogeneous origins of the Germanic tribes irrespective of their geographical dispersion.<sup>11</sup> In Italy, however, the term was used to denote regional origin as in, for example, „nazione fiorentina“ or „nazione milanese“.<sup>12</sup> The term „nation“ had thus already taken on many of the meanings which characterise modern nations.

From the seventeenth century, initially in France, but later in Germany and Italy, the term „nation“ gradually acquired a political connotation and came to mean those

5 Dr. Jovan Djordjević, *Osnovna pitanja federalizma danas*, izdavačka zadruga „Politika i društvo“ SOJ, Beograd, str. 156.

6 Enciklopedija Leksikografskog zavoda, „Jugoslovenski Leksikografski zavod“, Zagreb, tom 4, 1968, str. 455.

7 Pierre Margue, *Contre L'Etat-Nation*, „Editions Denöel“, Paris 1979, p. 37.

8 Dr. Josip Gunčević, *Nacionalitet s materijalne i formalne strane*, „Sklad“, Zagreb, 1935, str. 5; Rudi Rizman, *Marksizem in nacionalno vprašanje*, „Cankarjeva založba v Ljubljani“, Ljubljana, 1980, str. 35–37.

9 Frederico Clabod, *L'idea di nazione*, „Editori Laterza“, Bari, 1974, pp. 20–21.

10 Pierre Margue, *Contre L'Etat-Nation*, „Editions Denöel“, Paris, 1979, pp. 37–43.

11 Dragoš Kalajić, *Nacionalizam i evropeizam*, „Delo“, Beograd, 10/1977, str. 1017.

12 Frederico Chabod, *L'idea di nazione*, „Editori Laterza“, Bari, 1974, p. 21.



who ruled. It was thus used to describe „the King and the nobility“. Although Montesquieu also referred to the „Jewish nation“ and the „German people“, the concept of the „nation“ gradually became associated with the state. The dictionary of the Academie Francaise of 1694 thus defined „nation“ as a common term signifying „all inhabitants of the same state, the same country, who live under the same law and speak the same language“. Turgot, however, protested against this new usage and demanded that the word should continue to be used to denote „a group of families and peoples who speak the same language“, as distinct from a „state“ or „a people living in the same territory and subject to the same authority“.<sup>13</sup>

During the enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, coinciding with the establishment of modern states on the ruins of traditional monarchy, the word „nation“ finally passed into the sphere of ideology and acquired a meaning which legitimised and justified the authority of the state or confirmed its territorial needs and aspirations.<sup>14</sup>

The word „nation“ was used in Diderot's „Encyclopedia“, for example, to denote the rising „Third Estate“, and was later identified with the French bourgeois revolution. It was indeed the bourgeois revolution which finally confirmed the modern political meaning of the term „nation“.<sup>15</sup> The French revolution adopted the word as a means of distinguishing the Third Estate – the great majority of the people – from the privileged aristocracy, or insisted that only the Third Estate could claim to represent the nation<sup>16</sup>. At the same time the word nation was taken to mean that there were no longer Alsatians, Basques, Bretons or Provencales, but only Frenchmen. It expressed the demand for unity and indivisibility of the nation.

In the first few months of the revolution, despite this desire for unity, a relatively liberal policy was adopted towards non French languages spoken on French territory. This was demonstrated by the Constituent Assembly's decision of 14. January 1790 that its legislation should be translated into the various idioms then in use in France. As early as 1793, however, this liberal policy was discontinued. The French language – the King's French – became both a symbol of and a means of consolidating the Republic. It was, in fact, the language of the bourgeoisie which came to lead the revolution and the language of Paris, and thus served to cement the new national unity. All this, however, was ignored by several million people, which provoked Barrere, in a speech dated 27. January 1794, to condemn all those who did not speak French as „barberian nations“ destined to extinction. But since the propagation of the French language was left to the state, the French nation, in so far as it sought prevalence throughout the whole territory of the old Kingdom, had to identify itself with the French state. During the eighteenth century then, conceptions gradually changed so that the very idea of the (French) „nation“ came to be almost completely identified with the (French) state.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, especially during and after the French revolution, the state „confiscated“ the national idea and the word „nation“ came to

13 Pierre Margue, *Contre L'Etat-Nation*, „Editions Denoel“, Paris, 1979, pp. 44–5.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

15 Rudi Rizman, *Marksizem in nacionalno vprašanje*, „Cankarjeva založba v Ljubljani“, Ljubljana, 1979, str. 40–43.

16 Sieyes, *Cu'est-ce que le Tiers État*, Paris, 1789 (Pierre Margue, *Contre L'Etat-Nation*, Editions Denoel, Paris, 1979, p. 46).

17 Sieyes, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat*, Paris, 1789 (Pierre Margue, *Contre L'Etat-Nation*, „Editions Denoel“, Paris, 1979, pp. 46–50.

mean „populus“ (ie. the membership of a political entity)<sup>18</sup>. This also implied, however, a subtle alternation in the meaning of the word „state“ to the extent that nowadays the idea of a „nation-state“ is frequently confused with the very concept of the state.<sup>19</sup> The incorrect classification of nations as „states“ and states as „nations“ thus became even more widespread.

The romantic philosophers rebelled against this tendency to use the term „nation“ to describe states as well as particular communities. They made a clear distinction between nations, which they defined as communities or moral and cultural groupings, and „national states“ (stato nazionale), a term which they brought into popular usage, meaning states which had come into being as a result of the triumph of the „national principle“ (principio di nazionalità), which the romantics held to be the highest principle in the life of the people.<sup>20</sup>

The differences between the French revolutionary and romantic interpretations of the meaning of „nation“ have still not been resolved and it is therefore true that a complete „crystallisation“ of the meaning and use of the term has still not been achieved. In both English and French, for example, it is quite normal for the term „nation“ to be given a political meaning, while, in American literature especially, it is even regarded as being identical to the state. In English, however, the word „nation“ has many meanings: a social, historical community of people with the same territory and economic structure and a specific culture and language; the inhabitants of a certain territory living under a single government and administrative system – country, state; a people, a tribe of north American indians belonging to a given confederation, the territory of such a tribe.

The current terminological confusion is a reflection of the complexity of the social phenomenon known as the „nation“. It expresses a rich mass of genuine observations, but also many serious misinterpretations of their significance. It can even be said that there is relatively little controversy and confusion about the observation, identification, definition and naming of the many varied external manifestations of various aspects of the nation, but rather more controversy over what constitutes its real essence.<sup>21</sup>

The terminological confusion also results from the impossibility of fully expressing the rich and varied life of the nation in any definitive or even loose theoretical framework. The problem is not therefore restricted to anyone school of thought or the result of the lack of scientific objectivity in certain countries which suffer from „the sickness of nationalism“, although it may present a more serious obstacle to discussion of the real problems in some schools of thought and certain countries.<sup>22</sup>

The consequences of this confusion are manifold. It makes it difficult if not impossible to understand and theoretically define the concept of the nation in all its complexity and the many varied forms of its existence and appearance. It also gives rise to important „extra-theoretical“ problems, such as the ideological manipulation of

18 Yves Person, *Jezički imperijalizam i kolonijalizam „Marksizam u svetu“*, Beograd, 10/1977, str. 238.

19 Maks Veber, *Privreda i društvo*, I, „Prosveta“, Beograd, 1976, str. 334.

20 Frederico Chabod, *L'idea di nazione*, „Editori Laterza“, Bari, 1974, pp. 22–3.

21 A report by a study group of the R.I.I.A. (*Nationalism*, Oxford, 1939, pp. 17).

22 Cesare Luporini, *Prekidi i kontinuitet u najnovijem Althusserovom delu (Aktuelne rasprave o državi „Marksizam u svetu“*, Beograd, 5/1982, str. 74).



theoretical concepts for political or class purposes.

The clear and precise definition of terms and the concepts they express is not a mere convention but the *conditio sine qua non* of all dialogue, and therefore of scientific and theoretical discussion of social phenomena such as the nation. Concepts are not, in any case, empty abstractions but abstract expressions of real phenomena. To be precise, they pin-point the essence of social and political processes.

Clear concepts are neither universal and eternally valid „models“, nor „pure categories“ which can replace reality and observation. They are merely tools for making statements and undertaking research and going beyond what is already known. They are aids to the understanding of complex empirical data. Thus, despite its many negative consequences, terminological confusion prompts the search for its resolution, in this case, the attempt to clarify the meaning of the term „nation“ and to use it relatively consistently. It might also be added that the clear definition and consistent usage of the term will point to some of the problems which need to be resolved in order to gain a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

## 2. The (in)possibility of defining „Nation“

The terminological confusion which distinguished debate about the meaning of the word „nation“ was made still more complex by the fact that, starting from the first attempt to arrive at a theoretical definition (that of Pascal Mancinnia, professor of law at Torino University in 1851), the number of possible definitions rapidly increased. This multiplication of definitions was partly the result of „linguistic habits“, but was also, and more importantly, due to real difficulties in finding a definition of „nation“ which would reflect the variety and complexity of the phenomena it denoted. An additional problem was created by the contradictory nature of (scientific) opinion itself and by differences of methodological approach to the study of the nation.<sup>23</sup>

There were many other reasons inherent in the very nature of nineteenth century scientific thought, above all the tendency to search for universal laws and the belief that it would be possible to establish all-encompassing, generally accepted and absolutely perfect scientific definitions from which there could be no theoretical or practical exceptions. This effort was seriously limited, however, by the very discipline of scientific knowledge, its specialisation and the limits imposed by methodology, which meant that only certain elements of social phenomena could be stressed and explained within the strict limits of the given scientific discipline – even if the existence of other elements was acknowledged. This is the problem of the partialisation of knowledge, which most often restricts the subjects of analysis even when, as in the case of the nation, we are dealing with a complex whole.

Despite many attempts to define the meaning of „nation“ it can still be regarded as true that, „No one has yet succeeded in producing a valid definition of what exactly a nation is. Nor will anyone ever succeed, for the wisest definition can be empirically disproved“.<sup>24</sup> This state of affairs has convinced many authors that the

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23 Jerzy Wiatr, Osnovni problemi teorije nacije, „Ideje“, Beograd, 6/1971, str. 41.

24 Arnold Kunzli, Opijum nacionalizma, „Praxis“, Zagreb, 4/1968, str. 318–9.

defining – and even the discussion – of concepts is a futile and unnecessary exercise.<sup>25</sup>

It seems to me, however, that this problem should be approached from the opposite side. It is also valid that, „The nation is one of the many concepts of which we know the meaning until someone asks us, but which we cannot simply and coherently explain“.<sup>26</sup> It is indeed partly mythical, but also real.

At all events, the very existence of so many definitions of the nation is itself confirmation of the fact that a nation is a complex social phenomena. Major theoretical differences arise when the attempt is made to define, examine, evaluate and name the „internal bonds“ which join people in a national community. The evaluation of these connections is, however, vital to the definition of every social phenomena, and therefore of the nation. One of the tasks of scientific research is to resolve this difficult problem in order to create at least a common „grammar and syntax“ and the minimum necessary consensus on the theoretical framework of the debate. That is not possible if the nation is spoken of as an automatically understandable category. The nation cannot be understood in isolation from other social phenomena and it therefore follows that every current definition of the nation must be seen as relative, but we should not go to the other extreme. To refrain from the attempt to define the nation would be to add to the confusion and make all study and understanding of the concept impossible.

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25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, tom VII, Leipzig, 1910, str. 373; Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Sociološke studije*, „Školska knjiga“, Zagreb, 1980, str. 29; Roman Rybarsky, *Narod i klasa*, Warszawa, 1926, str. 1346 (Jerzy Wiatr, *Osnovni problemi teorije nacije*, „Ideje“, Beograd, 6/1971, str. 26); Henrik Walecki, *W kwestii zydowskiej* (Wybor pism., t. 2, Warszawa, 1967, str. 206.

26 W. Bagehot, *The origins of the nation*, London, 1874.