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ETHNONATIONALISM  
IN  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

NATIONAL IDENTITY

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## INTRODUCTION

can say with some degree of certainty is that national identity and nationalism are likely to remain powerful and proliferating forces in the foreseeable future. Hence the urgent need to increase our understanding of so global a condition and so explosive a force.

Anthony D. Smith,  
London School of Economics  
21 March 1990

## CHAPTER 1

### *National and Other Identities*

The year 429 BC marked a turning-point for Athens. In that year Pericles, after thirty years as the Athenian leader, succumbed to the plague that ravaged Athens. From that moment Athens' power visibly declined.

In the same year Sophocles staged what many consider to be his greatest tragedy, *Oedipus Tyrannos* (Oedipus the King). It is sometimes seen as the playwright's warning to his countrymen about the perils of pride and power, but its central theme is the problem of identity.

The play opens with a plague. But this one ravages Thebes, not Athens. We soon learn that it has been sent by the gods because of an unsolved murder long ago, that of the Theban king, Laius. Shortly after that murder on the road to Delphi Oedipus arrived in Thebes and freed the city from the terror of the Sphinx by correctly answering her riddles. Oedipus became king, married the widowed queen, Jocasta, and had with her four children, two boys and two girls.

At the beginning of the play Oedipus promises that he will discover the unclean presence that has brought the plague and must be banished. He sends for the blind seer, Teiresias; but Teiresias only answers darkly that he, Oedipus, is the unclean presence who must be sent into exile. Oedipus suspects that Teiresias has been put up to such an accusation by Jocasta's scheming brother Creon. But Jocasta heals their quarrel and reveals that her former husband, Laius, was murdered by robbers at a place 'where three roads meet'. This stirs Oedipus' memory of a moment when he killed some strangers. One man, however, survived, and on his return to Thebes begged to be sent away to the pastures. Oedipus sends for him. He must find out what happened to Laius.

A messenger arrives from Corinth and brings the news that Polybus, the king of that city and Oedipus' father, has died. This prompts Oedipus to reveal why he left Corinth long ago, never to



return. It was because of an oracle from Delphi, which said that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Even now he cannot return to Corinth for fear of marrying his mother, Merope.

But the Corinthian messenger has a surprise for Oedipus. He is not, after all, the son of the king and queen of Corinth. He was a foundling given to the royal couple because they were childless, and he was given to them by none other than the messenger himself long ago when he was a shepherd on Mount Cithaeron. If the messenger had not received him from his counterpart, the Theban shepherd, Oedipus would have died of exposure, his little feet swollen from the thongs that pierced them: hence his name, Oedipus (Swollen-foot). Who is this Theban shepherd, and where did he get the child with the pierced feet? Jocasta has realized the terrible truth and begs Oedipus to desist. He refuses. He must find out 'who he is'. Jocasta rushes out and hangs herself. Oedipus exults:

Let all come out, however vile! However base it be,  
I must unlock the secret of my birth. The woman,  
With more than woman's pride, is shamed by my low origin.  
I am the child of Fortune, the giver of good,  
And I shall not be shamed. She is my mother;  
My sisters are the Seasons; my rising and my falling  
March with theirs. Born thus, I ask to be no other man  
Than that I am, and will know who I am.<sup>1</sup>

The Theban shepherd is now brought in. He turns out to be the same man who fled when Laius was murdered, and the very man who gave the baby to the Corinthian messenger on Mount Cithaeron long ago, rather than let it die of exposure. Reluctantly at first, in mounting terror later, the Theban shepherd reveals the truth: he was the trusted servant of Laius and Jocasta; they gave him the baby to expose on Mount Cithaeron; it was because of an oracle; the baby was the child of Laius and Jocasta . . .

Oedipus rushes out, finds Jocasta hanging from the ceiling and blinds himself. The rest of his life becomes one long quest, first in Thebes, then in exile with Antigone, for the meaning of his strange destiny; until, in the grove of the Eumenides in Colonus outside Athens, the earth itself swallows him up, and by that act he hallows

Athens for ever. That was the poet's last thought, in 406 BC, at the end of his long life.<sup>2</sup>

### MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

There are many motifs, and more than one level, in Sophocles' play. But the question of identity, collective as well as individual, broods over the action. 'I will know who I am': the discovery of self is the play's motor and the action's inner meaning. But each 'self' that Oedipus uncovers is also a social self, a category and a role, even when it proves to be erroneous for Oedipus. Only after the shattering revelation of 'who he is' does he begin to glimpse the meaning of his destiny. He is not a successful ruler, a normal husband and father, or saviour of his city. In turn, he becomes a defiling presence, a murderer, a low-born slave, a foreigner, a child of Fortune. Only at the end does he see what, though sighted, he was unable to 'see' and what only Teiresias, the blind seer, could see. He will become another Teiresias, another blind seer, with the power to heal and save through his suffering and his unique fate.<sup>3</sup>

In Sophocles' drama Oedipus traverses a series of categories and roles. These roles and categories are at the same time so many collective identities, well known to fifth century Greeks. Even if they had no experience of kingship or murder, ancient Greeks were well acquainted with the symbolic and mythical significance of such subjects. The very strangeness of Oedipus' ultimate fate made the false roles he consecutively 'put on' seem familiar and easily intelligible.

Oedipus, like the other heroes whose exploits were dramatized by the Athenian tragedians, represented the normal person placed in unusual circumstances and set apart by a unique fate. He is normal in so far as the roles he occupied before the revelation of his origins represent so many collective identities and 'locations'. Like others, Oedipus has a series of such role-identities – father, husband, king, even hero. His individual identity is, in large part, made up of these social roles and cultural categories – or so it would appear until the moment of truth. Then his world is turned upside down, and his former identities are shown to be hollow.

The tale of Oedipus throws into sharp relief the problem of

identity. It reveals the way in which the self is composed of multiple identities and roles – familial, territorial, class, religious, ethnic and gender. It also reveals how each of these identities is based on social classifications that may be modified or even abolished. The revelation of Oedipus' birth teaches us that another, unseen world touches our material world, turns its social categories upside down and destroys all familiar identities.

What are these categories and roles of which each individual self is normally composed?

Most obviously and fundamentally, the category of gender. If not immutable, gender classifications are universal and pervasive. They also stand at the origin of other differences and subordinations. We are in many subtle as well as overt ways defined by our gender, as are many of our opportunities and rewards in life. At the same time the very universality and all-encompassing nature of gender differentiation makes it a less cohesive and potent base for collective identification and mobilization. Despite the rise of feminism in specific countries, gender identity, which spans the globe, is inevitably more attenuated and taken for granted than other kinds of collective identity in the modern world. Geographically separated, divided by class and ethnically fragmented, gender cleavages must ally themselves to other, more cohesive identities if they are to inspire collective consciousness and action.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the category of space or territory. Local and regional identity is equally widespread, particularly in pre-modern eras. Localism and regionalism also appear to possess the cohesive quality that gender differentiation generally lacks. But the appearance often proves to be deceptive. Regions easily fragment into localities, and localities may easily disintegrate into separate settlements. Only rarely do we meet a powerful and cohesive regional movement, as in the Vendée during the French Revolution; but, as in this case, its unity is likely to derive as much from ideology as from ecology. In most other cases 'regionalism' is unable to sustain the mobilization of its populations with their separate grievances and unique problems. Besides, regions are geographically difficult to define; their centres are often multiple and their boundaries ragged.<sup>5</sup>

A third type of collective identity is socio-economic, the category of social class. Oedipus' fear that he prove to be 'slave-born' mirrors

the ancient Greek fears of slavery and poverty – fears that have often provided the motors of political action, even when slavery was replaced by serfdom. In Marx's sociology class is the supreme, indeed the only relevant, collective identity and the sole motor of history. Certain kinds of social class – aristocracies of various kinds, bourgeoisies, proletariats – have sometimes provided bases for decisive political and military action. Sometimes: not always, not even frequently. United action by an 'aristocracy' is less common than factional conflicts within aristocracies. Conflicts of sectors and fractions of a national bourgeoisie are not uncommon, starting with the French Revolution itself, let alone conflict between the bourgeoisies of different nations. As for the working class, while the myth of the international brotherhood of the proletariat is widely accepted, that of the unity of workers within a given nation is equally prevalent and important, as workers divide into industrial sectors and along skill levels. Workers' revolutions are almost as rare as peasant ones; in both cases, sporadic, localized revolts have been the norm.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty with treating social class as a basis for an enduring collective identity is its limited emotional appeal and lack of cultural depth. Whether we define 'class', with Marx, as a relationship to the means of production or, with Weber, as an aggregate of those with identical life-chances in the market, there are clear limits to any attempt to use class as a basis for a sense of identity and community. Classes, like gender divisions, are often territorially dispersed. They are also largely categories of economic interest, and are hence likely to subdivide according to differences in income and skill levels. Besides, economic factors are subject to rapid fluctuations over time; hence the chances of retaining different economic groups within a class-based community are likely to be slim. Economic self-interest is not usually the stuff of stable collective identities.

There is a further aspect of class identity that both favours and militates against the formation of a stable community. 'Class' signifies a social relationship. There are always two or more classes in a given social formation in conflict, which helps to sharpen class differences, and hence identities, as studies of working-class culture in Britain have revealed. At the same time, by definition, only part of a given territorially bounded population will be included in such



class identities. If a more inclusive collective identity covering the whole population in that territory were to emerge, it would necessarily be of quite a different kind from an identity based on class and economic interests. Such wider collective identities might even challenge more restricted class identities, and perhaps undermine or divide them through an appeal to quite different criteria of categorization.

This is just what has often happened. Both religious and ethnic identities have striven to include more than one class within the communities created on their bases. Religious communities, where they aspire to be Churches, have appealed to all sectors of a given population or even across ethnic boundaries. Their message is either national or universal. It is never addressed to a particular class as such, even when in practice the religion is reserved for, or primarily aimed at, a particular class. Fifth-century Mazdakism in Sassanid Persia was undoubtedly a movement of social justice for the lower classes, but its message was, in principle, universal. Similarly, Anglicanism in eighteenth-century England was largely an upper-class and middle-class preserve, although in principle open to any Englishman. The many different forms of 'class religion' noted by Weber suggest the close links between class and religious identities and the frequent 'sliding' from one to the other.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, 'religious identity' is based on quite different criteria from those of 'social class' and emerges from quite different spheres of human need and action. Whereas class identities emerge from the sphere of production and exchange, religious identities derive from the spheres of communication and socialization. They are based on alignments of culture and its elements – values, symbols, myths and traditions, often codified in custom and ritual. They have therefore tended to join in a single community of the faithful all those who feel they share certain symbolic codes, value systems and traditions of belief and ritual, including references to a supra-empirical reality, however impersonal, and imprints of specialized organizations, however tenuous.<sup>8</sup>

Religious communities are often closely related to ethnic identities. While the 'world religions' sought to overstep, and abolish, ethnic boundaries, most religious communities coincided with ethnic groups. The Armenians, Jews and Monophysite Amhara offer classic

instances of this coincidence, as did the Copts before the Arab conquest of Egypt. The relationship can be even closer. What began as a purely religious community may end up as an exclusive ethnic community. The Druse, a schismatic Muslim sect founded in Egypt but persecuted there, removed to the fastnesses of Mount Lebanon, where they welcomed Persians and Kurds as well as Arabs into their ranks for about ten years in the early eleventh century. But, with the death of their last great teacher, Baha'al Din (d. AD 1031), proselytization ceased. Membership of the community became fixed, largely because of fear of religious foes outside. Entry to, and exit from, the community of the faithful was no longer permitted. Soon the Druse became as much a community of descent and territory. To be a Druse today, therefore, is to belong to an 'ethno-religious' community.<sup>9</sup>

Even now many ethnic minorities retain strong religious bonds and emblems. Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Poles, Serbs and Croats, Maronites, Sikhs, Sinhalese, Karen and Shi'i Persians are among the many ethnic communities whose identity is based on religious criteria of differentiation. Here, too, as John Armstrong demonstrates, it is easy to 'slide' from one type of identity to another, and overlap is frequent. For the greater part of human history the twin circles of religious and ethnic identity have been very close, if not identical. Each people in antiquity possessed its own gods, sacred texts, rituals, priesthoods and temples, even where minority or peasant groups might also share in the dominant religious culture of their rulers. Even in early medieval Europe and the Middle East the world religions of Islam and Christianity sometimes subdivided into ethnically demarcated Churches or sects, as with the Armenians and Copts and, later, the Persian Shi'ites. Though one cannot argue conclusively for ethnic causation, there are enough circumstantial cases to suggest strong links between forms of religious identity, even within world religions, and ethnic cleavages and communities.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, analytically the two kinds of cultural collective identity must be clearly distinguished. Religious community may, after all, divide an ethno-linguistic population, as happened among the Swiss or Germans and in Egypt. For a long time religious cleavages prevented the emergence of a strong and enduring ethnic

consciousness among these populations – until the era of nationalism succeeded in uniting the community on a new, political basis. Similarly, though world religions like Buddhism and Christianity may be adapted to pre-existing ethnic communities that they in turn reinforce, as in Sri Lanka and Burma, they may, equally, help to erode ethnic differences, as happened to several barbarian peoples when they converted to Christianity and merged with neighbouring peoples, as was the case with Angles, Saxons and Jutes in England.<sup>11</sup>

In the next chapter I shall explore the particular features of ethnic identity that mark it off from other, including religious, identities. For the moment the similarities between religious and ethnic identity need to be stressed. Both stem from similar cultural criteria of classification. They frequently overlap and reinforce one another. And singly or together, they can mobilize and sustain strong communities.

#### THE ELEMENTS OF 'NATIONAL' IDENTITY

One kind of collective identity, so important and widespread today, is barely mentioned in Sophocles' Theban plays. Though they sometimes hinge on conflict between cities, they never raise the question of 'national' identity. Oedipus' identities are multiple, but being 'foreign' (i.e. non-Greek) is never one of them. Collective conflicts are, at most, wars between Greek city-states and their rulers. Did this not, in fact, mirror the state of ancient Greece in the fifth century BC?

It was Friedrich Meinecke who in 1908 distinguished the *Kulturnation*, the largely passive cultural community, from the *Staatsnation*, the active, self-determining political nation. We may dissent from his use of these terms, indeed from the terms themselves; but the distinction itself is valid and relevant. Politically, there was no 'nation' in ancient Greece, only a collection of city-states, each jealous of its sovereignty. Culturally, however, there existed an ancient Greek community, Hellas, that could be invoked, for example by Pericles, in the political realm – usually for Athenian purposes. In other words we can speak of a Greek cultural and ethnic community but not of an ancient Greek 'nation'.<sup>12</sup>

This suggests that, whatever else it may be, what we mean by 'national' identity involves some sense of political community, however tenuous. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong. This was very much what the *philosophes* had in mind when they defined a nation as a community of people obeying the same laws and institutions within a given territory.<sup>13</sup>

This is, of course, a peculiarly Western conception of the nation. But then the Western experience has exerted a powerful, indeed the leading, influence on our conception of the unit we call the 'nation'. A new kind of policy – the rational state – and a new kind of community – the territorial nation – first emerged in the West, in close conjunction with each other. They left their imprint on subsequent non-Western conceptions, even when the latter diverged from their norms.

It is worth spelling out this Western or 'civic' model of the nation in more detail. It is, in the first place, a predominantly spatial or territorial conception. According to this view, nations must possess compact, well-defined territories. People and territory must, as it were, belong to each other, in the way that the early Dutch, for example, saw themselves as formed by the high seas and as forging (literally) the earth they possessed and made their own. But the earth in question cannot be just anywhere; it is not any stretch of land. It is, and must be, the 'historic' land, the 'homeland', the 'cradle' of our people, even where, as with the Turks, it is not the land of ultimate origin. A 'historic land' is one where terrain and people have exerted mutual, and beneficial, influence over several generations. The homeland becomes a repository of historic memories and associations, the place where 'our' sages, saints and heroes lived, worked, prayed and fought. All this makes the homeland unique. Its rivers, coasts, lakes, mountains and cities become 'sacred' – places of veneration and exaltation whose inner meanings can be fathomed only by the initiated, that is, the self-aware members of the nation. The land's resources also become exclusive to the people; they are not for 'alien' use and exploitation. The



national territory must become self-sufficient. Autarchy is as much a defence of sacred homelands as of economic interests.<sup>14</sup>

A second element is the idea of a *patria*, a community of laws and institutions with a single political will. This entails at least some common regulating institutions that will give expression to common political sentiments and purposes. Sometimes, indeed, the *patria* is expressed through highly centralized and unitary institutions and laws, as in post-Revolutionary France, though even there the various regions retained their local identities into the early twentieth century. At the other extreme we find unions of separate colonies, provinces and city-states, whose federal institutions and laws are designed as much to protect local or provincial liberties as to express a common will and common political sentiments. Both the United States of America and the United Provinces of the Netherlands offer well-documented cases of such national unions. In many ways the primary purpose of the Union of Utrecht in 1579 and of the Netherlands' States General was to protect the ancient liberties and privileges of the constituent provinces, which had been so rudely assailed by Habsburg policies of centralization under Charles V and Philip II. Nevertheless, the ferocity and duration of the war against Spain soon bred a sense of common purpose and identity (quite apart from Calvinist influence) that expressed a growing Dutch national political community, albeit incomplete.<sup>15</sup>

Concurrent with the growth of a sense of legal and political community we may trace a sense of legal equality among the members of that community. Its full expression is the various kinds of 'citizenship' that sociologists have enumerated, including civil and legal rights, political rights and duties, and socio-economic rights. Here it is legal and political rights that the Western conception considers integral to its model of a nation. That implies a minimum of reciprocal rights and obligations among members and the correlative exclusion of outsiders from those rights and duties. It also implies a common code of laws over and above local laws, together with agencies for their enforcement, courts of final appeal and the like. As important is the acceptance that, in principle, all members of the nation are legally equal and that the rich and powerful are bound by the laws of the *patria*.

Finally, the legal equality of members of a political community

in its demarcated homeland was felt to presuppose a measure of common values and traditions among the population, or at any rate its 'core' community. In other words, nations must have a measure of common culture and a civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas, that bind the population together in their homeland. The task of ensuring a common public, mass culture has been handed over to the agencies of popular socialization, notably the public system of education and the mass media. In the Western model of national identity nations were seen as culture communities, whose members were united, if not made homogeneous, by common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions. Even where new, immigrant communities equipped with their own historic cultures have been admitted by the state, it has taken several generations before their descendants have been admitted (in so far as they have been) into the circle of the 'nation' and its historic culture through the national agencies of mass socialization.<sup>16</sup>

Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology; these are the components of the standard, Western model of the nation. Given the influence of the West in the modern world, they have remained vital elements, albeit in somewhat altered form, in most non-Western conceptions of national identity. At the same time a rather different model of the nation sprang up outside the West, notably in Eastern Europe and Asia. Historically, it challenged the dominance of the Western model and added significant new elements, more attuned to the very different circumstances and trajectories of non-Western communities.

We can term this non-Western model an 'ethnic' conception of the nation. Its distinguishing feature is its emphasis on a community of birth and native culture. Whereas the Western concept laid down that an individual had to belong to some nation but could choose to which he or she belonged, the non-Western or ethnic concept allowed no such latitude. Whether you stayed in your community or emigrated to another, you remained ineluctably, organically, a member of the community of your birth and were for ever stamped by it. A nation, in other words, was first and foremost a community of common descent.



This ethnic model also has a number of facets. First, obviously, is the stress on descent – or rather, presumed descent – rather than territory. The nation is seen as a fictive 'super-family', and it boasts pedigrees and genealogies to back up its claims, often tracked down by native intellectuals, particularly in East European and Middle Eastern countries. The point here is that, in this conception, the nation can trace its roots to an imputed common ancestry and that therefore its members are brothers and sisters, or at least cousins, differentiated by family ties from outsiders.

This emphasis on presumed family ties helps to explain the strong popular or demotic element in the ethnic conception of the nation. Of course, the 'people' figure in the Western model too. But there they are seen as a political community subject to common laws and institutions. In the ethnic model the people, even where they are not actually mobilized for political action, nevertheless provide the object of nationalist aspirations and the final rhetorical court of appeal. Leaders can justify their actions and unite disparate classes and groups only through an appeal to the 'will of the people', and this makes the ethnic concept more obviously 'inter-class' and 'populist' in tone, even when the intelligentsia has little intention of summoning the masses into the political arena. Popular mobilization therefore plays an important moral and rhetorical, if not an actual, role in the ethnic conception.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the place of law in the Western civic model is taken by vernacular culture, usually languages and customs in the ethnic model. That is why lexicographers, philologists and folklorists have played a central role in the early nationalisms of Eastern Europe and Asia. Their linguistic and ethnographic research into the past and present culture of the 'folk' provided the materials for a blueprint of the 'nation-to-be', even where specific linguistic revivals failed. By creating a widespread awareness of the myths, history and linguistic traditions of the community, they succeeded in substantiating and crystallizing the idea of an ethnic nation in the minds of most members, even when, as in Ireland and Norway, the ancient languages declined.<sup>18</sup>

Genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions: these are the elements of an alternative, ethnic conception of the nation, one that mirrored

the very different route of 'nation-formation' travelled by many communities in Eastern Europe and Asia and one that constituted a dynamic political challenge. It is, as we shall see, a challenge that is repeated to this day in many parts of the world, and it reflects the profound dualism at the heart of every nationalism. In fact every nationalism contains civic and ethnic elements in varying degrees and different forms. Sometimes civic and territorial elements predominate; at other times it is the ethnic and vernacular components that are emphasized. Under the Jacobins, for example, French nationalism was essentially civic and territorial; it preached the unity of the republican *patrie* and the fraternity of its citizens in a political-legal community. At the same time a linguistic nationalism emerged, reflecting pride in the purity and civilizing mission of a hegemonic French culture preached by Barère and the Abbé Grégoire. In the early nineteenth century French cultural nationalism began to reflect more ethnic conceptions of the nation, whether Frankish or Gallic; later these became validating charters for radically different ideals of France. The clerical-monarchist Right was particularly wedded to genealogical and vernacular conceptions of an 'organic' nation, which it opposed to the republican territorial and civic model, notably during the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, even during the most severe conflicts mirroring opposed models of the nation certain fundamental assumptions tied the warring parties together through a common nationalist discourse. In the French example just cited both republicans and monarchists accepted the idea of France's 'natural' and historic territory (including Alsace). Similarly, there was no real dispute about the need to inculcate national ideals and history through a mass, public education system, only about some of its content (notably the Catholic dimension). Devotion to the French language was also universal. Similarly, nobody questioned the individuality of France and the French as such; differences arose only over the historical content of that uniqueness and hence the lessons to be drawn from that experience.

This suggests that behind the rival models of the nation stand certain common beliefs about what constitutes a nation as opposed to any other kind of collective, cultural identity. They include the idea that nations are territorially bounded units of population and

that they must have their own homelands; that their members share a common mass culture and common historical myths and memories; that members have reciprocal legal rights and duties under a common legal system; and that nations possess a common division of labour and system of production with mobility across the territory for members. These are assumptions, and demands, common to all nationalists and widely accepted even by their critics, who may then go on to deplore the ensuing global divisions and conflicts created by the existence of such nations.

The existence of these common assumptions allows us to list the fundamental features of national identity as follows:

1. an historic territory, or homeland
2. common myths and historical memories
3. a common, mass public culture
4. common legal rights and duties for all members
5. a common economy with territorial mobility for members.

A nation can therefore be defined as *a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.*<sup>20</sup>

Such a provisional working definition reveals the complex and abstract nature of national identity. The nation, in fact, draws on elements of other kinds of collective identity, which accounts not only for the way in which national identity can be combined with these other types of identity – class, religious or ethnic – but also for the chameleon-like permutations of nationalism, the ideology, with other ideologies like liberalism, fascism and communism. A national identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional; it can never be reduced to a single element, even by particular factions of nationalists, nor can it be easily or swiftly induced in a population by artificial means.

Such a definition of national identity also sets it clearly apart from any conception of the state. The latter refers exclusively to public institutions, differentiated from, and autonomous of, other social institutions and exercising a monopoly of coercion and extraction within a given territory. The nation, on the other hand, signifies a cultural and political bond, uniting in a single political community

all who share an historic culture and homeland. This is not to deny some overlap between the two concepts, given their common reference to an historic territory and (in democratic states) their appeal to the sovereignty of the people. But, while modern states must legitimate themselves in national and popular terms as the states of particular nations, their content and focus are quite different.<sup>21</sup>

This lack of congruence between the state and the nation is exemplified in the many 'plural' states today. Indeed, Walker Connor's estimate in the early 1970s showed that only about 10 per cent of states could claim to be true 'nation-states', in the sense that the state's boundaries coincide with the nation's and that the total population of the state share a single ethnic culture. While most states aspire to become nation-states in this sense, they tend to limit their claims to legitimacy to an aspiration for political unity and popular sovereignty that, even in old-established Western states, risks being challenged by ethnic communities within their borders. These cases, and there are many of them, illustrate the profound gulf between the concepts of the state and the nation, a gulf that the historical material to be discussed shortly underlines.<sup>22</sup>

#### SOME FUNCTIONS AND PROBLEMS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Let me recapitulate. National identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components – ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal-political. They signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own but are entirely different from the purely legal and bureaucratic ties of the state. Conceptually, the nation has come to blend two sets of dimensions, the one civic and territorial, the other ethnic and genealogical, in varying proportions in particular cases. It is this very multidimensionality that has made national identity such a flexible and persistent force in modern life and politics, and allowed it to combine effectively with other powerful ideologies and movements, without losing its character.

We can illustrate this multifaceted power of national identity by looking at some of the functions it fulfils for groups and individuals.



In line with the dimensions listed above, we can conveniently divide these functions into 'external' and 'internal' objective consequences.

The external functions are territorial, economic and political. Nations, first, define a definite social space within which members must live and work, and demarcate an historic territory that locates a community in time and space. They also provide individuals with 'sacred centres', objects of spiritual and historical pilgrimage, that reveal the uniqueness of their nation's 'moral geography'.

Economically, nations underwrite the quest for control over territorial resources, including manpower. They also elaborate a single division of labour, and encourage mobility of goods and labour, as well as the allocation of resources between members within the homeland. By defining the membership, the boundaries and the resources, national identity provides the rationale for ideals of national autarchy.<sup>23</sup>

Politically, too, national identity underpins the state and its organs, or their pre-political equivalents in nations that lack their own states. The selection of political personnel, the regulation of political conduct and the election of governments are grounded in criteria of national interest, which is presumed to reflect the national will and national identity of the inclusive population.

But perhaps the most salient political function of national identity is its legitimation of common legal rights and duties of legal institutions, which define the peculiar values and character of the nation and reflect the age-old customs and mores of the people. The appeal to national identity has become the main legitimation for social order and solidarity today.

National identities also fulfil more intimate, internal functions for individuals in communities. The most obvious is the socialization of the members as 'nationals' and 'citizens'. Today this is achieved through compulsory, standardized, public mass education systems, through which state authorities hope to inculcate national devotion and a distinctive, homogeneous culture, an activity that most regimes pursue with considerable energy under the influence of nationalist ideals of cultural authenticity and unity.<sup>24</sup>

The nation is also called upon to provide a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions. By the use of symbols – flags, coinage,

anthems, uniforms, monuments and ceremonies – members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging. The nation becomes a 'faith-achievement' group, able to surmount obstacles and hardships.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture. It is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know 'who we are' in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we 'rediscover' ourselves, the 'authentic self', or so it has appeared to many divided and disoriented individuals who have had to contend with the vast changes and uncertainties of the modern world.

This process of self-definition and location is in many ways the key to national identity, but it is also the element that has attracted most doubt and scepticism. Given the wide range of human attitudes and perceptions, it is hardly surprising if nationalists, their critics and the rest of us have been unable to agree on the criteria for national self-definition and location. The quest for the national self and the individual's relationship to it remains the most baffling element in the nationalist project.

These doubts are both philosophical and political. Because of the many kinds of national self that present themselves in practice (a natural result of the multifaceted nature of the nation), nationalist doctrine has been attacked as logically contradictory or incoherent. The indeterminacy of national criteria and their vague, shifting, often arbitrary character in the writings of nationalists have undermined the ideology's credibility, even where respect has been accorded to individual nationalist propositions such as the idea of cultural diversity. At best the idea of the nation has appeared sketchy and elusive, at worst absurd and contradictory.<sup>26</sup>

Intellectual scepticism is paralleled by moral condemnation. In the name of 'national identity' people have allegedly been willing to surrender their own liberties and curtail those of others. They have been prepared to trample on the civil and religious rights of ethnic, racial and religious minorities whom the nation could not absorb. International, or more accurately inter-state, relations have similarly suffered. The ideal of the nation, transplanted across the globe from

its Western heartlands, has brought with it confusion, instability, strife and terror, particularly in areas of mixed ethnic and religious character. Nationalism, the doctrine that makes the nation the object of every political endeavour and national identity the measure of every human value, has since the French Revolution challenged the whole idea of a single humanity, of a world community and its moral unity. Instead nationalism offers a narrow, conflict-laden legitimation for political community, which inevitably pits culture-communities against each other and, given the sheer number and variety of cultural differences, can only drag humanity into a political Charybdis.<sup>27</sup>

This is a familiar indictment, and its scope and intensity proclaim the emotional and political power of the ideal that it so utterly condemns. But an ideal and an identity that can fulfil so many functions, collective and individual, are bound to have the most varied social and political consequences, given the variety of circumstances in which nationalists must operate. We could, equally, catalogue the benign effects of nationalism: its defence of minority cultures; its rescue of 'lost' histories and literatures; its inspiration for cultural renaissances; its resolution of 'identity crisis'; its legitimation of community and social solidarity; its inspiration to resist tyranny; its ideal of popular sovereignty and collective mobilization; even the motivation of self-sustaining economic growth. Each of these effects could, with as much plausibility, be attributed to nationalist ideologies as the baneful consequences listed by critics. No more striking, or revealing, testimony could be offered to the ambiguous power of national identity and nationalism or to their profound relevance, for good or ill, to most people in most areas of the world today.

Why this should be so, and what the deeper roots of the power exerted today by national identities are, we must now explore.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Ethnic Basis of National Identity*

The origins of what we have termed national identity are as complex as its nature. I am not saying simply that the origins of each nation are in many ways unique and that there is great variation in the starting-points, trajectories, rates and timings of modern nations. The very question 'what are the origins of nations?' needs to be broken down into several further questions, such as: who is the nation? Why and how is the nation? When and where is the nation?

In fact we can conveniently use these questions to seek a general explanation of the origins and development of modern nations in three parts.

1. *Who* is the nation? What are the ethnic bases and models of modern nations? Why did these particular nations emerge?
2. *Why* and *how* does the nation emerge? That is, what are the general causes and mechanisms that set in motion the processes of nation-formation from varying ethnic ties and memories?
3. *When* and *where* did the nation arise? What were the specific ideas, groups and locations that predisposed the formation of individual nations at particular times and places?

Through answers to these questions, albeit of a general and necessarily incomplete nature, we may hope to shed some light on the vexed problem of national origins and development.

### ETHNIC AND ETHNO-GENESIS

If myths like that of Oedipus can be seen as widely believed tales told in dramatic form, referring to past events but serving present purposes and/or future goals, then the nation stands at the centre of one of the most popular and ubiquitous myths of modern times: that of nationalism. Central to this myth is the idea that nations exist from time immemorial, and that nationalists must reawaken