

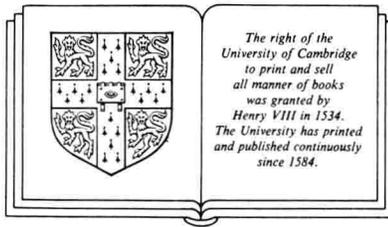


*Nations and nationalism*  
*since 1780*

*Programme, myth, reality*



E. J. HOBSBAWM



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## *Preface*

This book is based on the Wiles Lectures which I had the honour to give at the Queen's University of Belfast in May 1985. The location suggested the topic. For the sake of convenience the somewhat concentrated contents of the four lectures to which the Lectureship commits the visitor have been spread out. There are now five chapters of unequal length, an introduction and some concluding reflections. The manuscript has also been revised, partly to take account of some later material, but mainly in the light of the discussions with the invited group of experts, which is one of the chief attractions of the Wiles Lectures for those fortunate enough to give them. I am grateful to all those who organized the lectures and those who took part in the discussions, and in particular to Perry Anderson, John Breuilly, Judith Brown, Ronan Fanning, Miroslav Hroch, Victor Kiernan, Joe Lee, Shula Marks, Terence Ranger and Göran Therborn, for criticism and stimulation and especially for making me think further about non-European nationalism. However, I have concentrated mainly on the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, when the subject is rather Eurocentric or at any rate centred in the 'developed' regions. Since I have been some time talking and asking questions about nations and nationalism, there are many others who have given me ideas, information or references to books I would not otherwise have known about. At the risk of unfairness I single out Kumari Jayawardene and the other South Asian scholars at the World Institute for Development Economics Research in Helsinki, and my colleagues and students at the New School for Social Research in New York, who have heard and discussed some of this material. Much of the research for this

book was made possible by a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship, and I should like to express my appreciation for the generous assistance thus provided by the Leverhulme Trust.

'The national question' is a notoriously controversial subject. I have not sought to make it any less controversial. However, I hope that these lectures in their printed form will advance the study of the historical phenomena with which they attempt to come to grips.

London 1989

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## *Introduction*

Suppose that one day, after a nuclear war, an intergalactic historian lands on a now dead planet in order to enquire into the cause of the remote little catastrophe which the sensors of his galaxy have recorded. He or she – I refrain from speculating on the problem of extraterrestrial physiological reproduction – consults the terrestrial libraries and archives which have been preserved, because the technology of mature nuclear weaponry has been designed to destroy people rather than property. Our observer, after some study, will conclude that the last two centuries of the human history of planet Earth are incomprehensible without some understanding of the term ‘nation’ and the vocabulary derived from it. This term appears to express something important in human affairs. But what exactly? Here lies the mystery. He will have read Walter Bagehot, who presented the history of the nineteenth century as that of ‘nation-building’, but who also observed, with his usual common sense: ‘We know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it.’<sup>1</sup> This may be true for Bagehot and for us, but not for extragalactic historians who have not the human experience which appears to make the idea of the ‘nation’ so convincing.

I think it would today be possible, thanks to the literature of the past fifteen to twenty years, to provide such a historian with a short reading list to help him, her, or it with the desired analysis, and to supplement A. D. Smith’s ‘Nationalism: A Trend Report and Bibliography’, which contains most references in the field up to that

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (London 1887), pp. 20–21.

date.<sup>2</sup> Not that one would wish to recommend all that much that was written in earlier periods. Our reading list would contain very little that was written in the classic period of nineteenth-century liberalism, for reasons which should become clear later, but also because very little other than nationalist and racist rhetoric was being written then. And the best work produced at that time was actually very brief, like John Stuart Mill's passages on the subject in his *Considerations on Representative Government* and Ernest Renan's famous lecture 'What is a nation?'<sup>3</sup>

The reading list would contain some historically necessary, as well as some optional reading from the first major effort to apply dispassionate analysis to the subject, the important and underestimated debates among the Marxists of the Second International on what they called 'the national question'. We shall see later why the best minds in the international socialist movement – and it contained some extremely powerful intellects – applied themselves to this problem: Kautsky and Luxemburg, Otto Bauer and Lenin, to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> Probably it would contain some of Kautsky, certainly Otto Bauer's *Die Nationalitätenfrage*, but it would also need to contain Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, not so much for its modest, but not negligible – if somewhat derivative – intellectual merits, but rather for its subsequent political influence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A. D. Smith, 'Nationalism, A Trend Report and Bibliography' in *Current Sociology* xxi/3, The Hague and Paris 1973. See also the bibliographies in the same author's *Theories of Nationalism* (London, 2nd edn 1983) and *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford 1986). Professor Anthony Smith is at present the main guide in this field for readers of the English language.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est ce que c'est une nation?* (Conférence faite en Sorbonne le 11 mars 1882) (Paris 1882); John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London 1861), chapter xvi.

<sup>4</sup> For a convenient introduction, including a selection of writings by the chief Marxist authors of the time, Georges Haupt, Michel Lowy and Claudie Weill, *Les Marxistes et la question nationale 1848–1914* (Paris 1974). Otto Bauer, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie* (Vienna 1907, the second edition of 1924 contains an important new introduction), appears, unaccountably, not to have been translated into English. For a recent attempt, Horace B. Davis, *Toward a Marxist Theory of Nationalism* (New York 1978).

<sup>5</sup> The 1913 text was published together with later writings in Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (London 1936) in a volume which had considerable international influence, not only among communists, especially in the dependent world.

It would not, in my judgment, deserve to contain much from the age of those who have been called 'the twin founding fathers' of the academic study of nationalism, after World War I: Carleton B. Hayes and Hans Kohn.<sup>6</sup> Nothing was more natural than that the subject should attract attention in a period when the map of Europe was, for the first – and as it turned out for the only – time redrawn according to the principle of nationality, and when the vocabulary of European nationalism came to be adopted by new movements of colonial liberation or Third World assertion, to which Hans Kohn at least paid considerable attention.<sup>7</sup> Nor is there any doubt that the writings of this period contain a mass of material drawn from the earlier literature, which can save the student a good deal of primary reading. The chief reason for the obsolescence of so much of it is that the main innovation of the period, which had incidentally been anticipated by the Marxists, has become commonplace, except among nationalists. Nations, we now know – not least through the efforts of the Hayes–Kohn era – are not, as Bagehot thought, 'as old as history'.<sup>8</sup> The modern sense of the word is no older than the eighteenth century, give or take the odd predecessor. The academic literature on nationalism multiplied, but did not advance greatly in the following decades. Some would regard the work of Karl Deutsch, who stressed the role of communication in the formation of nations, as a major addition to it, but I would not regard this author as indispensable.<sup>9</sup>

It is not altogether clear why the literature on nations and nationalism entered so fruitful a phase about twenty years ago, and indeed the question only arises for those who believe that it did so. This is not yet a universally established view. The problem will be considered in the final chapter, though not in great detail. At all

<sup>6</sup> Carleton B. Hayes, *The Historical Evolution of Modern Nationalism* (New York 1931) and Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in its Origin and Background* (New York 1944) contain valuable historical material. The phrase 'founding fathers' comes from the valuable study in philological and conceptual history, A. Kemiläinen, *Nationalism. Problems Concerning the Word, the Concept and Classification* (Jyväskylä 1964).

<sup>7</sup> See his *History of Nationalism in the East* (London 1929); *Nationalism and Imperialism in the Hither East* (New York 1932).

<sup>8</sup> Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication. An Enquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge MA 1953).

events, in the opinion of the present author, the number of works genuinely illuminating the question of what nations and national movements are and what role in historical development they play is larger in the period 1968–88 than for any earlier period of twice that length. The text which follows should make it clear which of them I have found particularly interesting, but it may be convenient to mention a few important titles, among which the author refrains from including all but one of his own writings on the subject.<sup>10</sup> The following brief list may serve as an introduction to the field. It is an alphabetical order of authors, except for the work of Hroch, which opened the new era in the analysis of the composition of national liberation movements.

- Hroch, Miroslav. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge 1985). This combines the findings of two works published by the author in Prague in 1968 and 1971.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities* (London 1983)
- Armstrong, J. *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill 1982)
- Breuilly, J. *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester 1982)
- John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf. *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (New York and London 1974)
- J. Fishman (ed.) *Language Problems of Developing Countries* (New York 1968)
- Ernest Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford 1983)
- Hobsbawm, E. J. and Ranger, Terence (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983)
- Smith, A. D. *Theories of Nationalism* (2nd edn, London 1983)
- Szücs, Jenő. *Nation und Geschichte: Studien* (Budapest 1981)

<sup>10</sup> These are, in addition to chapters on the subject in *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (1962), *The Age of Capital 1848–1875* (1975) and *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (1987): 'The attitude of popular classes towards national movements for independence' (Celtic parts of Great Britain) in Commission Internationale d'Histoire des Mouvements Sociaux et Structures Sociales, *Mouvements nationaux d'indépendance et classes populaires aux XIXe et XXe siècles en Occident et en Orient*, 2 vols. (Paris 1971), vol. 1, pp. 34–44; 'Some reflections on nationalism' in T. J. Nossiter, A. H. Hanson, Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Imagination and Precision in the Social Sciences: Essays in Memory of Peter Nettl* (London 1972 pp. 385–406); 'Reflections on "The Break-Up of Britain"' (*New Left Review*, 105, 1977); 'What is the worker's country?' (ch. 4 of my *Worlds of Labour*, London 1984); 'Working-class internationalism' in F. van Holthoorn and Marcel

Tilly, C. (ed.) *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton 1975)

To these I cannot resist adding a brilliant essay written from within the subjective identification with a 'nation', but with a rare sense of its historical context and malleability, Gwyn A. Williams, 'When was Wales?' in this author's *The Welsh in their History* (London and Canberra 1982).

Most of this literature has turned on the question: What is a (or the) nation? For the chief characteristic of this way of classifying groups of human beings is that, in spite of the claims of those who belong to it that it is in some ways primary and fundamental for the social existence, or even the individual identification, of its members, no satisfactory criterion can be discovered for deciding which of the many human collectivities should be labelled in this way. That is not in itself surprising, for if we regard 'the nation' as a very recent newcomer in human history, and the product of particular, and inevitably localized or regional, historical conjunctures, we would expect it to occur, initially as it were, in a few colonies of settlement rather than in a population generally distributed over the world's territory. But the problem is that there is no way of telling the observer how to distinguish a nation from other entities *a priori*, as we can tell him or her how to recognize a bird or to distinguish a mouse from a lizard. Nation-watching would be simple if it could be like bird-watching.

Attempts to establish objective criteria for nationhood, or to explain why certain groups have become 'nations' and others not, have often been made, based on single criteria such as language or ethnicity or a combination of criteria such as language, common territory, common history, cultural traits or whatever else. Stalin's definition is probably the best known among these, but by no means the only one.<sup>11</sup> All such objective definitions have failed, for the obvious reason that, since only some members of the large class

van der Linden (eds.), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement* (Leiden–New York–Copenhagen–Cologne 1988, pp. 2–16).

<sup>11</sup> 'A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.' Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, p. 8. The original was written in 1912.

of entities which fit such definitions can at any time be described as 'nations', exceptions can always be found. Either cases corresponding to the definition are patently not (or not yet) 'nations' or possessed of national aspirations, or undoubted 'nations' do not correspond to the criterion or combination of criteria. How indeed could it be otherwise, given that we are trying to fit historically novel, emerging, changing and, even today, far from universal entities into a framework of permanence and universality?

Moreover, as we shall see, the criteria used for this purpose – language, ethnicity or whatever – are themselves fuzzy, shifting and ambiguous, and as useless for purposes of the traveller's orientation as cloud-shapes are compared to landmarks. This, of course, makes them unusually convenient for propagandist and programmatic, as distinct from descriptive purposes. An illustration of the nationalist use of such an 'objective' definition in recent Asian politics may make this clear:

The Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Singalese by every fundamental test of nationhood, firstly that of a separate historical past in the island at least as ancient and as glorious as that of the Singalese [*sic*], secondly by the fact of their being a linguistic entity entirely different from that of the Sinhalese, with an unsurpassed classical heritage and a modern development of language which makes Tamil fully adequate for all present-day needs, and finally by reason of their territorial habitation of definite areas.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this passage is clear: it is to demand autonomy or independence for an area described as 'over one third of the island' of Sri Lanka, on grounds of Tamil nationalism. Nothing else about it is as it seems. It obscures the fact that the territorial habitation consists of two geographically separate areas inhabited by Tamil speakers of different origins (indigenous and recent Indian immigrant labour respectively); that the area of continuous Tamil settlement is also, in certain zones, inhabited by anything up to a third of Sinhalese and anything up to 41% of Tamil speakers who refused to consider themselves national Tamils and prefer identi-

<sup>12</sup> Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi, 'The case for a federal constitution for Ceylon', Colombo 1951, cited in Robert N. Kearney, 'Ethnic conflict and the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka' (*Asian Survey*, 25, 9 September 1985, p. 904).

cation as Muslims (the 'Moors'). In fact, even leaving aside the central region of immigrants, it is not at all clear that the territory of major continuous Tamil settlement, comprising as it does areas of solid Tamil settlement (from 71 to 95% – Batticaloa, Mullaitivu, Jaffna) and areas where self-identified Tamils form 20 or 33% (Amparal, Trincomalee) should be described, except in purely cartographic terms, as a single space. In fact, in the negotiations which led to the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 1987, the decision to do so was a straightforward political concession to the demands of the Tamil nationalists. As we have already seen the 'linguistic entity' conceals the unquestionable fact that indigenous Tamils, immigrant Indians and Moors are – so far – a homogeneous population in no other than the philological sense, and, as we shall see, probably not even in this sense. As for the 'separate historical past', the phrase is almost certainly anachronistic, question-begging or so vague as to be meaningless. It may, of course, be objected that patently propagandist manifestos should not be scrutinized as though they were contributions to the social sciences, but the point is that almost any classification of some community as a 'nation' on the grounds of such purportedly objective criteria would be open to similar objections, unless the fact that it was a 'nation' could be established on other grounds.

But what other grounds? The alternative to an objective definition is a subjective one, whether collective (along the lines of Renan's 'a nation is a daily plebiscite') or individual, in the manner of the Austro-Marxists, for whom 'nationality' could attach to persons, wherever they lived and whoever they lived with, at any rate if they chose to claim it.<sup>13</sup> Both are evident attempts to escape from the constraints of *a priori* objectivism, in both cases, though in a different manner, by adapting the definition of 'nation' to territories in which persons of different languages or other 'objective' criteria coexist, as they did in France and the Habsburg empire. Both are open to the objection that defining a nation by its

<sup>13</sup> Karl Renner specifically compared the individual's national membership with his (her) membership of a religious confession, i.e. a status 'freely chosen, *de jure*, by the individual who has reached the age of majority, and on behalf of minors, by their legal representatives'. Synopticus, *Staat und Nation* (Vienna 1899) pp. 7ff.

members' consciousness of belonging to it is tautological and provides only an *a posteriori* guide to what a nation is. Moreover, it can lead the incautious into extremes of voluntarism which suggests that all that is needed to be or to create or recreate a nation is the will to be one: if enough inhabitants of the Isle of Wight wanted to be a Wightian nation, there would be one.

While this has, especially since the 1960s, led to some attempts at nation-building by consciousness-raising, it is not a legitimate criticism of observers as sophisticated as Otto Bauer and Renan, who knew perfectly well that nations also had objective elements in common. Nevertheless, to insist on consciousness or choice as the criterion of nationhood is insensibly to subordinate the complex and multiple ways in which human beings define and redefine themselves as members of groups, to a single option: the choice of belonging to a 'nation' or 'nationality'. Politically or administratively such a choice must today be made by virtue of living in states which supply passports or ask questions about language in censuses. Yet even today it is perfectly possible for a person living in Slough to think of himself, depending on circumstances, as – say – a British citizen, or (faced with other citizens of a different colour) as an Indian, or (faced with other Indians) as a Gujarati, or (faced with Hindus or Muslims) as a Jain, or as a member of a particular caste, or kinship connection, or as one who, at home, speaks Hindi rather than Gujarati, or doubtless in other ways. Nor indeed is it possible to reduce even 'nationality' to a single dimension, whether political, cultural or otherwise (unless, of course, obliged to do so by *force majeure* of states). People can identify themselves as Jews even though they share neither religion, language, culture, tradition, historical background, blood-group patterns nor an attitude to the Jewish state. Nor does this imply a purely subjective definition of 'the nation'.

Neither objective nor subjective definitions are thus satisfactory, and both are misleading. In any case, agnosticism is the best initial posture of a student in this field, and so this book assumes no *a priori* definition of what constitutes a nation. As an initial working assumption any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a 'nation', will be treated as such.

However, whether such a body of people does so regard itself cannot be established simply by consulting writers or political spokesmen of organizations claiming the status of 'nation' for it. The appearance of a group of spokesmen for some 'national idea' is not insignificant, but the word 'nation' is today used so widely and imprecisely that the use of the vocabulary of nationalism today may mean very little indeed.

Nevertheless, in approaching 'the national question' 'it is more profitable to begin with the concept of "the nation" (i.e. with "nationalism") than with the reality it represents'. For 'The "nation" as conceived by nationalism, can be recognized prospectively; the real "nation" can only be recognized *a posteriori*.'<sup>14</sup> This is the approach of the present book. It pays particular attention to the changes and transformations of the concept, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century. Concepts, of course, are not part of free-floating philosophical discourse, but socially, historically and locally rooted, and must be explained in terms of these realities.

For the rest, the position of the writer may be summarized as follows.

(1) I use the term 'nationalism' in the sense defined by Gellner, namely to mean 'primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.'<sup>15</sup> I would add that this principle also implies that the political duty of Ruritarians to the polity which encompasses and represents the Ruritanian nation, overrides all other public obligations, and in extreme cases (such as wars) all other obligations of whatever kind. This implication distinguishes modern nationalism from other and less demanding forms of national or group identification which we shall also encounter.

(2) Like most serious students, I do not regard the 'nation' as a primary nor as an unchanging social entity. It belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period. It is a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state,

<sup>14</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Some reflections on nationalism', p. 387.

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 1. This basically political definition is also accepted by some other writers, e.g. John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, p. 3.

the 'nation-state', and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to it. Moreover, with Gellner I would stress the element of artefact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations. 'Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent ... political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that is a reality.*'<sup>16</sup> In short, for the purposes of analysis nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round.

(3) The 'national question', as the old Marxists called it, is situated at the point of intersection of politics, technology and social transformation. Nations exist not only as functions of a particular kind of territorial state or the aspiration to establish one – broadly speaking, the citizen state of the French Revolution – but also in the context of a particular stage of technological and economic development. Most students today will agree that standard national languages, spoken or written, cannot emerge as such before printing, mass literacy and hence, mass schooling. It has even been argued that popular spoken Italian as an idiom capable of expressing the full range of what a twentieth-century language needs outside the domestic and face-to-face sphere of communication, is only being constructed today as a function of the needs of national television programming.<sup>17</sup> Nations and their associated phenomena must therefore be analysed in terms of political, technical, administrative, economic and other conditions and requirements.

(4) For this reason they are, in my view, dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist. If I have a major criticism of Gellner's work it is that his preferred

<sup>16</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, pp. 48–9.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Sorella, 'La televisione e la lingua italiana' (*Trimestre. Periodico di Cultura*, 14, 2–3–4 (1982), pp. 291–300.

perspective of modernization from above, makes it difficult to pay adequate attention to the view from below.

That view from below, i.e. the nation as seen not by governments and the spokesmen and activists of nationalist (or non-nationalist) movements, but by the ordinary persons who are the objects of their action and propaganda, is exceedingly difficult to discover. Fortunately social historians have learned how to investigate the history of ideas, opinions and feelings at the sub-literary level, so that we are today less likely to confuse, as historians once habitually did, editorials in select newspapers with public opinion. We do not know much for certain. However, three things are clear.

First, official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what it is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens or supporters. Second, and more specifically, we cannot assume that for most people national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. In fact, it is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them. Thirdly, national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift in time, even in the course of quite short periods. In my judgment this is the area of national studies in which thinking and research are most urgently needed today.

(5) The development of nations and nationalism within old-established states such as Britain and France, has not been studied very intensively, though it is now attracting attention.<sup>18</sup> The existence of this gap is illustrated by the neglect, in Britain, of any problems connected with English nationalism – a term which in itself sounds odd to many ears – compared to the attention paid to Scots, Welsh, not to mention Irish nationalism. On the other hand there have in recent years been major advances in the study of national movements aspiring to be states, mainly following Hroch's pathbreaking comparative studies of small European national movements. Two points in this excellent writer's analysis

<sup>18</sup> For the range of such work, see Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism. The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (3 vols., London 1989). I have found the work of Linda Colley particularly stimulating, e.g. 'Whose nation? Class and national consciousness in Britain 1750-1830' (*Past & Present*, 113, 1986), pp. 96-117.