

Herder and the Idea of a Nation

Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh

Volume 7, Issue 1, May 2018

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0007.103> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0007.103>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>]

The modern concept of ‘nation’ to describe the whole of a particular society was first used by the German philosopher and scholar Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder insisted that his idea of the nation was not at all political – though it became so later. Herder’s unpolitical perspective originated in his living under a dynastic-aristocratic regime which ruled Prussia where he spent his formative years. Bourgeois scholar-intellectuals like him did not have access to politics in German states. The dynastic-aristocratic establishment ruled exclusively by itself. In Herder’s time it was still too powerful and too much taken-for-granted to oppose it openly. Herder’s pioneering effort therefore had to be explicitly unpolitical – for political reasons. But Herder’s criteria for speaking of a nation – language and cultural properties – later justified claims to be a specific nation, whether in the form of states or of parts of states aspiring to become states. Before Herder’s perspective, the concept ‘nation’ had a more limited meaning. Latin ‘nationes’, for example, designated groups of university students from a particular region.

Though Herder insisted on the unpolitical charter of nations, he did use ‘nation’ several times in a discussion of a political issue. Contemporary scholars in the history of ideas have regarded this as inconsistent and not true to his own ideas. Again, it can be explained by the dilemmas inherent in Herder’s position. In any case, his political use of the concept of ‘nation’ did not change his general idea of nations.

Herder’s ideas about nations are still worth discussing, because his criteria still influence the contemporary perspective on the nation. As Herder is not that well known, some biographical information might be useful. Johann Gottfried Herder was born in 1744 in a small provincial town, Mohrungen, then in the Kingdom of Prussia, which after 1945 became Morąg in Poland. He started his studies in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) at the precocious age of seventeen. He studied with Kant and became a protégé of Hamann. Afterwards he became a cleric in Riga and wrote literary criticism which Goethe liked. Herder and Goethe became friends. After obtaining positions which left him enough time to study and write, Goethe helped him, still at a young age, in 1776 to be appointed ‘general superintendent’ at the Court of Weimar. That largely honorary position made it possible for Herder to become a prolific author, writing on many different subjects. His idea of the nation remained dear to him. At the end of his very productive career the French Revolution took place. Herder declared himself in favour of that revolution, but did not change his view on his idea of the nation. He died in 1803, aged 59.

In Herder’s time the hierarchical structure of German states, large or small, was generally accepted, and did not warrant a revolution. What was possible in France was not on the agenda in decentralised, fragmented Germany. That made it more difficult for members of the bourgeoisie to have any access to state functions. Military and foreign policy continued to be the preserve of the higher aristocracy. Ambitious members of the bourgeoisie (Bürgertum) could, at best, acquire a reputation in the world of learning. Herder became a versatile scholar. His work is still primarily studied for its contribution to the history of ideas and the relation of his thought to the thought of other authors. Isaiah Berlin, for example, represented Herder as a critic of the Enlightenment. He even described Herder as a ‘populist’ – his own meaning of the term, not in terms of what populism means at present. Herder did use the concept of ‘Volksgeist’ (spirit of the people) for the generalised feeling of belonging to a nation rather than a state.

Herder wrote on very diverse subjects. His first success as a scholar came when he received a prize for a treatise on the origin of language. He consolidated his reputation with a book ironically titled 'Auch eine Philosophie für die Geschichte der Formation der Menschheit' ('Yet Another Philosophy of the History of the Formation of Mankind'). His main work was a dense volume 'Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind' which aimed to be a description and analysis of everything known of the development of societies on all continents – at the time of his writing. He considered the specific form of all nations as 'naturally' given, criticizing the generalizing perspective of the Enlightenment thinkers. Hence, Berlin's categorisation of Herder as a populist. Herder saw the different origins and character of societies and cultures as the basis of nations. Though he did include some remarks on German tribal peoples of the past, he remained silent about the actual German state-societies in which he himself lived. Though he did see Germany as a nation, he stuck to the unpolitical meaning of the concept, perhaps for political reasons. In any case, he kept his idea of the nation clear of any political meaning. In the literature about Herder which I have consulted, it is pointed out that Herder considered the unpolitical character of his idea of nations as crucial, but not why this was so.

Herders idea of the nation as unpolitical could in fact be a political perspective. Herder hated the state of Prussia because of its expansionist and war-prone policies and its despotic character. He saw the borders of dynastic states as artificial and those of nations as natural. In Herder's time dynastic states ruled by aristocratic regimes were still accepted as being in the nature of things. The people ruled were of heterogeneous origin, in part as the result of migratory movements. Rulers, however, were not interested in the composition of the ruled. What, then, could make opposition to the rulers of dynastic states possible? Herder may not explicitly have thought of the nation as a power resource, but his idea of the nation was implicitly the only possible growing source of resistance to dynastic states. Herder defended his idea of the nation by stressing its character as peaceful. He stated that the Volksgeist of all nations would determine their specific character and that they would no longer be forced to compete. His idea of nations would guarantee that mankind would become peaceful. Herder's idea of the nation was therefore more political than he would admit. Whether, or not, Herder realised this is another matter. At the end of his life he did accept the aristocratic 'von' before his name – and, practically at the same time, rejoiced in the French revolution. This may illustrate the ambivalence of Herder's orientation.

II

Herder's idea of viable unpolitical nations can be tested by the case of a small people having his 'properties' of a nation, the Lazi. This nation is much smaller than, say, Catalonia or Scotland, but shares with them a number of characteristics. At present, there are about a hundred thousand Lazi. They have their own language, Lazuri. The Lazi live together around Trabzon in Turkey, in an area where green mountains rise up from the Black Sea. The green is tea, which used to be their main livelihood. They still live together, as a minority in Turkey. As a new state in the 1920s, Turkey was founded on the idea of a unified people with its own standard language. The language and culture of small minorities like the Lazi were tolerated. The much larger minority of Kurds (around twenty million) were, even if loyal to the Turkish state, connected to the Kurds living in neighbouring states. The idea of a Turkish nation led to discrimination and political exclusion of Kurds. The present Turkish government and Kurdish organizations are at war.

The Lazi and their neighbours, the smaller Hemsinli (about 20,000), avoided the fate of the Kurds. They kept to themselves. The Lazi are supposed to have migrated from the Caucasus, many centuries ago. When exactly, nobody knows. Their language belongs to a pre-Indo-European family, to which Georgian also belongs. The Hemsinli branched off from Armenia and long ago converted to Islam. For that reason, they were not persecuted in Turkey, unlike the Christian Armenians.

The Lazi were relevant to Herder's idea of the nation. They are an example of what Herder saw as unpolitical 'nations'. The Lazi, as Neal Acherson remarks, can be seen as a pre-nationalist nation. They may possess the characteristics of a nation, without being aware of it. They do not see themselves as a nation, though they identify with each other and speak their own language. The idea of claiming to be a nation was not attractive to the Lazi. Being small and weak they probably thought it best to 'let sleeping dogs lie' and remain quiet. The Lazi continued to live as they had done through the centuries.

Enter Wolfgang Feurstein, a German linguist. He set about learning Lazuri in a professional manner. He soon concluded that the Lazi were a potential nation – implicitly in Herder's meaning. The lack of a written language was compensated for by a lively oral culture, with communal singing, fairy tales and other story-telling and festivities. The Lazi did not know their own history, for example, they did not remember that they had been Christians until the Ottoman conquest of the Pontus area in the fifteenth century. Feurstein feared that the forces of modernisation and mass communication would make the Lazi lose their identity, together with their language and culture. Lazuri would then become a dead language. Lazi's already watched Turkish television, knew Turkish and read Turkish newspapers. Feurstein made it his calling to save Lazi culture from dying out by strengthening their national characteristics.

Would Lazi language and culture indeed have died out without Feurstein's efforts? Languages change, some disappear through state policies, others survive in changed form, absorbing new words related to current fashion and technical developments. Within states, regional identities can remain and preserve local languages or dialects. A relatively small centralised state like the Netherlands has a large number of dialects spoken both in towns and in the countryside. In the case of Frisian, this language has been officially recognised as a distinct language. It even won the right to be used as a language in courts. But, politically, it has generated no separatist movement. Most, if not all, Frisians are bilingual. This implies that the functional reach of standardised languages in states does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of minority dialects and other languages. State societies need standardised languages for bureaucracies, armies, schools, communication and industrial production. But dialects are surprisingly resistant, and now include new forms of culture and popular music. All Lazi are now bilingual, learning and speaking Lazuri before school age, and subsequently learning Turkish at school. The Lazi seem thus to have kept their language and culture intact, even as they became more assimilated into Turkey.

Feurstein made the development of the Lazi into a 'proper' nation his task, even his mission. He regarded the Lazi as an authentic nation that he could help to become conscious of its national identity. Using Herder's criteria he interpreted their lively cultural habits and ancient language as a valuable part of humanity which should be made aware of its destiny and protected. But when Feurstein started his missionary work, Turkish government officials regarded his efforts as subversive. He was beaten up and expelled. He took his calling seriously and continued his work from Schopfloch, a village in Germany. A few Lazi emigrants helped him to stay in contact with Lazi living in Turkey and further develop Lazi culture, especially poetry. Herder might well have agreed with Feurstein's view of what constituted a nation and the Lazi's potential to become one. For Herder, as for Feurstein, the first priority would have been to create a Lazuri alphabet. That would make it possible to produce elementary school books written in Lazuri as well as to develop a Lazuri dictionary, which would make it a real language. For Feurstein that was a beginning. He collected aspects of national culture like folksongs, poems and stories, and put them into writing. He saw the results as the start of a Lazi national literature.

It would be more likely, however, that Feurstein would become a sorcerer's apprentice rather than the father of a newly-born nation. The nation he hoped to help develop was part of an established state which jealously guarded and propagated its own claim to nationhood. The Turkish authorities would surely oppose the assertion of Lazi national identity which Feurstein hoped to achieve. In the village of Schopfloch he did not

have to be concerned with the danger for the Lazi of going too far politically. He was busy studying Lazi poetry with the help of a few loyal Lazis. He did not limit himself to Herder's unpolitical perspective. His nation-building was clearly political, and he remained persona non grata in Turkey. Most Lazi understood their precarious situation and took Feurstein's efforts with a grain of salt. Lazi may have been a nation on the basis of apolitical criteria, but that was it. The fate of the Lazi was shared by most national minorities. When called 'national' it implies that they are part of a state nation which they have to respect. Most contemporary states have incorporated minorities. In Europe, only the Habsburg empire was unable to integrate its larger minorities. After losing in the first World War most of the Habsburg empire's national minorities became independent states, instead of unpolitical nations as defined by Herder.

Herder assumed that nations were entities with a specific language and cultural properties. But history fulfilled neither his preferences nor his expectations. Herder's unpolitical nations did often develop nationalist movements and then Herder's cultural criteria became part of the legitimation of states. Herder has been wrongly included in the pantheon of nationalist ideologues and philosophers. He was far from being a nationalist in the sense used today.

Herder's thought did include a problem that contemporary ideas of a nation cannot solve either. Lazi, Kurds and Turks, are all these three nations? What are nations? Can we say: this group of people is a nation and that group is not? Herder cannot provide the answer. He saw Slavs as much as Germans as potential nations. Were they? Pan-Slavism failed as a tool of Tsarist foreign policy. Slav was a category of languages and did not turn into a national movement

The still unsolved problem is how to distinguish nations from non-nations – or even from each other. National self-determination seemed attractive after the first World War. But self-determination would require nations to be objectively defined and demarcated. That made US President Wilson's self-determination initiative weak. Nations are not a particular kind of entity, they do not exist as such. They are the subject of an idea of a nation and the belief that nations exist as objective entities.

III

Herder should not be seen as a nationalist in the modern sense. His ideas had already been formed before the French revolution, which he welcomed and might have seen France as becoming a nation as he defined it. But for Herder the most important property of nations was that they were opposed to states. He believed that nations were not interested in conquest. They would be content with their borders and way of life, so they would no longer need to compete with each other. In his *Perpetual Peace* Kant similarly argued that republics would not be disposed to go to war. When peoples could follow their own interest and establish republics, Kant argued, in line with Herder's perspective on nations, wars could no longer be justified.

The transformation of Herder's idea of the nation into the current perspective of nations and nationalism is clear. His conviction that nations are not political entities and should not coincide with states is the opposite of the idea of the nation as it in fact developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His own view of the nation is based on an organic model of its development and structure. Herder, in no way supported antagonistic nationalism. His ideas have nevertheless influenced the standard political perspective on the nation as clearly formulated by Elie Kedourie:

Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It pretends to supply a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a

government, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organisation of a society of states. Briefly, the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics that can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is self-government.

Herder's ideas can be recognised particularly in the 'characteristics that can be ascertained'. What else can these be but language and cultural properties? These criteria have since become politicised. Could Herder have foreseen this? That is not a fair question. Herder was a child of his time and of the political environment in which he lived. Herder was influenced by the quest for emancipation of the bourgeoisie, as the intelligentsia, civil servants, professionals and artists. In his books on *Mozart* and on *The Germans* Norbert Elias has analysed this process in Germany and compared the increasing political opportunities and role of the bourgeoisie in France and the stagnation of their position in Germany. The dynastic-aristocratic class preserved its political dominance even after Prussia unified Germany in 1871 through the victory over France. Now, ironically, but not at the time, French advisers to Frederick the Great helped to build Prussian bureaucracy. That Prussian monarch illustrated the dynastic orientation to power and lack of interest in nationality. He still believed that the German language did not lend itself to be used for serious literature. He could hardly read German, spoke French and did not identify at all with the people he ruled. They were just subjects (Untertanen). According to Heinrich Mann who wrote a novel titled 'Der Untertan', Germans kept that subject mentality until the democratisation at the end of the Second World War. Herder's ideas about nations being formed by a specific language and culture were in fact subversive. But he was not tried or put in jail for these ideas. Still, it was unthinkable in Prussia to postulate the nation as a political unit other than the state. Like other German writers, classified as Romantic, Herder used categories like feeling, inner life, art and literature, on which bourgeois culture was based. This perspective was opposed to the cold rationality and superior manners of the aristocracy, seen as civilisation. A distinction between culture and civilisation developed. The different trajectory of 'culture' and 'civilisation' has been discussed by Norbert Elias in the first chapter of 'On the Process of Civilisation'. The distinction illuminates the difference between the pattern of development of the idea of the nation and politics in Germany and France.

Herder's moral view of the character of nations a century later turned into a political perspective. It was used to justify revolt against colonial rule. In that way Sukarno claimed independence for an Indonesian nation that had never existed. Herder's emphasis on culture, religion included, legitimated new states. In Germany, nationalism was only partly responsible for the unification of the German Empire ('Reich', which has no equivalent in English). German unity was forged by dynastic struggles for hegemony in the German territories, in the end between Prussia and the Habsburg Empire. After Habsburg Austria had been eliminated from the German 'Bund', a war by Prussia against France led in 1871 to a united Germany. It is wrong to call Germany a 'nation first' state. A hegemonic dynamic was much more important than Herder's perspective. Germany remained dominated by the military-aristocratic class as it had been during Herder's life. The cultural values in which Herder believed and which he saw as the kernel of a nation – and of Germany – remained politically weak. In fact, Germany was unified by struggles of elimination. Herder's expectations of the in-the-long-run beneficial role of nation formation were negated by political developments. The idea of the nation has legitimated the competition between states, not the other way round.

The idea of the nation implies an unsolved problem as shown already by the fate of the Lazi. Herder ignored it. Can a group of people objectively be seen as a nation? Are there objective criteria to distinguish nations from each other? If these questions cannot be answered nations can exist only subjectively or ideologically. Nations are not objective entities. They can be conceived as processes (Elias) or they can be treated as myths or symbols believed in or invented for political reasons. Herder's belief in the peaceful character of satisfied

nations was a dream. Feurstein believed that the Lazi were an unpolitical nation but the Turkish authorities thought otherwise: they frustrated Feurstein's efforts. The belief in a nation can be as convincing in old established states as in new states. In nineteenth century France peasants began to identify as French and see France as their nation. Not all the French had and have the same idea of the French nation. But a variant can be used to legitimise the French state.

The idea of a nation can be very important in the struggle between traditional European empires and states. When the idea of a nation does not legitimate a state, it can become 'failed', characterised by competing warlords or civil war. How to distinguish nations from non-nations remains an unsolved problem for Herder and still for contemporary political scientists. Even if nations are seen as an imagined idea rather than as an entity, that problem remains. Herder did not solve the problem, perhaps because he did not realise its existence. We now know that established states must take account of the welfare of their people, of the needs and demands of the ruled. When power relations change in that direction, the character of states changes and they become more equal – but never completely so. Norbert Elias answers the question of the character of nations with a process perspective. He gives the following criterion for nation formation:

Societies assume the characteristics of nations if the functional interdependence between their regions and social strata as well as their hierarchical levels of authority and subordination become sufficiently great and sufficiently reciprocal for no one to disregard completely what others think, feel or wish.

This is a clear definition, which lends itself well to be used for comparative analysis, not only for Europe. For Elias, nation building has to be seen as a phase in and of state formation. But there is a snag: when all social classes identify with a state as a nation they may not identify with their counterparts on the other side of the borders and even with foreigners such as refugees. Then they may become captivated by nationalist ideas and convinced of their own superiority. Nationalism can be used to justify oppression and even murder of minorities. Marx hoped the opposite, that working-class solidarity across borders would prevent war. The origins of the First World War showed how mistaken he had been. The nineteenth century, however, saw the peaceful side of nation formation, reducing the distance between rulers and ruled and social classes. The welfare state was initiated by Bismarck, among other reasons, to increase his political popularity.

The process of nation formation also has an ideological aspect. The nationalist worldview can become a powerful myth and symbol of a self-satisfied identity. The world is not seen as an interdependent whole, but as made up by separated entities who have the right to act in what they regard as in their own interest only ('making great' again). It may be remembered that, for Nazis, cosmopolitanism was regarded as a characteristic of Jews. The problem is that the myth of nations complicates cooperation between states, especially great powers. In recent years nationalist ideas have been directed against 'foreigners' and even more against 'refugees'.

Elias has remarked that national self-images represent their nations as unchanged through the ages. That makes it more difficult for minorities to assert their own identity and interests. Minorities have been and still are oppressed by the established regimes of nation states. They use Herder's criteria of nationhood to justify their privileged power, not always successfully. Colonial empires have been defeated by the strength of the nationalism of their subjects and the feeling of their soldiers of involvement in a war not theirs. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult even for powerful minorities to achieve independence for regions like Scotland or Catalonia. They have become socially and economically interwoven with the nation-states of which they are a part. Nationalist ideology alone may not suffice.

'What is a nation?' was probably first discussed in public in France. In 1882 Ernest Renan gave a speech at the Sorbonne in which he attempted to answer that question, which had become important to his audience. In Germany, a bourgeois academic would and could not do this. To argue that France is a nation, Renan uses similar criteria to characterise the French nation as Herder would have. Language did not help Renan as a criterion because German speaking Alsace-Lorraine had been annexed by Germany after it had defeated France in 1871. But it remained seen by the French as part of the French nation. France wanted the region back as a 'revanche'. Renan examined the idea of the French nation against that background. He wanted to understand and define the idea of the French nation. Renan found Herder's criteria wanting. He made short shrift of all of them: whether religion, culture or ethnic character. He argued that a general definition of 'nation' could, not be based on objective criteria. Therefore a subjective definition became necessary. Renan's answer has become a classic:

A nation for us is a soul, a spirit, a spiritual family, resulting in the past as memories, sacrifices, glory, often mourning and shared regrets, in the present as wanting to live together. What constitutes a nation is not to speak the same language or to belong to the same ethnic group. It is to have done great things together in the past and wanting to do these again in the future.

'Great things' echo Trump's inaugural speech. Renan's definition is especially suited to 'great powers' competing for hegemony. But he also provided a criterion that applies to all nations: the will to be and to stay together. All nation-states cultivate memories of crucial events in their past. Renan was right that objective criteria do not provide for a workable definition of a nation. In Elias' process perspective nations are not static. Neither are they based on ethnicity, which can only develop through a myth. Nation-building in Elias' sense does not follow the same trajectory in every state. The criteria Elias has introduced leave room for different patterns of development. The emphasis in schools and in politics on national symbols like a flag, a national anthem, on the role of a unique leader, the heroic deeds of the armed forces and a special way of life are all aspects of the formation of 'nations'. The road to respectable nationhood is difficult. Most new states in Africa have as their lingua franca languages inherited from their colonial ruler. Religion can play a role in developing nations, but can also be divisive. Culture is more important, but a national culture in new states still needs to be imported or developed from the tribal heritage. Some African and most Asian states deploy historical civilisations as symbols. Many African and Asian states are internally divided precisely on Herder's criteria. They are still at the beginning of building nations according to Elias' perspective. New states cannot use history as effectively as the United States, France, Britain and most small states in Europe have done, or as Iran for that matter.

The concept of nation will remain contested. The English historian Hugh Seton-Watson provides a curious example. He agrees that 'nation' cannot be objectively defined, but adds 'yet the phenomenon has existed and exists'. In his book *Nations and States*, he nevertheless discusses at length what he admits he cannot define. Still, he treats nations implicitly as historically existing entities, without having solved the riddle of his own making. Herder could not know that his view of nations anticipated the development of eminently political ideas legitimating the authority of established states and motivating the nationalism of regions or new states. The variety of uses of the idea of a nation is great. The idea of nation – and nationalism – in an increasingly interdependent world can become an obstacle to the development of solutions to global problems like climate change or human rights. Herder believed in universalism as the natural outcome of the development of his unpolitical nations. These would all be equally satisfied and therefore peaceful. Nations would not be competitive while states suffered from their rivalry – and ultimately war. But Herder could not foresee that his own criteria for the idea of the nation could justify war and oppression.

Bibliography

Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea*, London, 1995.

Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, London, 2000.

Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*, Collected Works, vol.3, Dublin, 2012. Original edition, Basel, 1939.

— *Mozart*, Collected Works, Vol.12. Dublin, 2010.

— *Studies on the Germans*, Collected Works, Vol.11, Dublin 2013.

— *Processes of State Formation and Nation Building*, Collected Works, Vol.15, Dublin, 2008.

On Herder:

Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung uber den Ursprung der Sprache*, Berlin, 1770.

— *Yet Another Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Auch eine Philosophie für die Geschichte der Menschheit), Berlin, 1774.

— *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind* (Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit), Neuausgabe, Bodenheim, 1995.

On Herder's Idea of the Nation:

Andrew Hamilton, *Herder's Theory of the Volksgeist*, Counter Currents Publications, San Francisco, 2011.

Immanuel Kant, *Zum Ewigen Frieden*, Königsberg, 1795.

Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, New York, 1961.

Alan Patton, 'The Most Natural State': *Herder and Nationalism*, History of Political Thought, Vol.XXXI, No.4, Winter 2010.

Helmuth Plessner, *Die Verspatete Nation*, Stuttgart, 1959.

Ernest Renan, *Qu'est ce que c'est une Nation?* Paris, 1882.

Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States, An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, London, 1977.

Richard White, *Herder: On the Ethics of Nationalism*, Humanitas, Vol.18, No 1, 2005.

Note

The author was Special Professor of International Relations at Erasmus University, Rotterdam and Associate Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. He published widely in Dutch and English on international politics, the functions of nuclear weapons, the idea of the nation and the sociology of Norbert Elias. His autobiographical book on his experiences of manic-depression has been published in Dutch, *Uit de Put*, Amsterdam, 2017.

Hosted by [Michigan Publishing](#), a division of the [University of Michigan Library](#).

For more information please contact mpub-help@umich.edu.

Online ISSN: 2166-6644