3
On the principle of nationality

JOHN BREUILLY

1 Introductory comments

Nationality can be constructed as fact and value. Its construction as value presupposes its construction as fact. First, there *are* nations; second, nations *are* bearers of values. However, nations can be constructed as facts without regarding them also as bearers of values on which to base cultural or political programmes.

I define the principle of nationality as consisting of three claims: humanity is divided into nations; nations are worthy of recognition and respect; recognition and respect require autonomy, usually meaning political independence within the national territory.[1] Thus the principle of nationality contains an empirical claim, a value assertion and a political goal, each building on the previous proposition. These are *logical* relationships; they do not necessarily occur in that chronological order. This principle was constructed in nineteenth-century Europe.[2] The empirical, normative and programmatic constructions took on increasingly complex, differentiated and conflicting forms as the principle of nationality loomed an ever larger role in political culture and practice.

These considerations inform the structure of this essay. After a brief historical background I focus on how the principle of nationality was

My thanks to Monika Baar, Stefan Berger, Mark Hewitson, Peter Mandler, Gareth Stedman Jones and Oliver Zimmer for comments made on drafts of this essay.

1 This follows closely the definition of nationalism I use in Breuilly 1993, pp. 3–4 which in turn was influenced by the notion of a 'core doctrine' of Smith 1971, p. 21. It is also close to that used by Gellner 2006, p. 1 and Kedourie 1966, so this is not an eccentric definition.

2 This is a similar but not identical claim to the one asserted strikingly by Elie Kedourie in the opening sentence of his book on nationalism: 'Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century' (Kedourie 1966, p. 9). The difference is that I do not claim that the invention of the doctrine was responsible for the formation of nationalist sentiments, movements and nation states. This essay is focused on ideas and doctrines but I contend these are to be sharply distinguished from nationality understood either as sentiments or political movements and organisations. For my critique of Kedourie see Breuilly 2000, and for my argument as to the distinctions to be made, see Breuilly 1994.

developed after 1800. I argue that this took place in four broad phases: nation as civilisation, as historic, as ethnic and as racial. Nationalist discourse did not so much shift from one to the next as add layers and increase public acceptance of the principle. The centrality of this principle in political culture promoted political change in the direction of nation state formation and rendered attempts to defend alternative political principles ever more incredible.

One final introductory point: nationalist doctrines have not been the work of 'great' thinkers as is arguably the case for socialist, liberal and conservative doctrines. Influential 'thinkers' are distinct from original ones. Mazzini is tedious to read as he asserts rather than argues and his 'ideas' exerted power more through personal example and action than through originality. Original thinkers often had influence far distant in time and place from themselves. Herder influenced Slav nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century more than German nationalism in his own time; Fichte's *Reden an die Deutsche Nation* had less impact in Napoleonic Germany than in Wilhelmine Germany. Some original thinking on nationality did exercise some influence; arguably this was the case with Thomas Carlyle (Mandler 2006, ch. 3). Instead the principle of nationality was developed and diffused largely by narrower and second-rank thinkers – historians, linguists, folklorists – operating in networks formed by universities, newspapers, periodicals and political and cultural associations, in close connection to the situations which also gave rise to a politics of nationalism. My essay will focus on such networks rather than individual thinkers and works.[3]

2 The national idea before 1800

Broadly 'nation' referred to political elites and institutions constituting territorial monarchies.[4] It acquired meanings to do with high culture and specific territory and its inhabitants following a long history of stable rule over a core region, as in England and France. It was deployed in internal political conflict, such as appeals to 'patriotism' by oppositional and governmental politicians in eighteenth-century Britain and France. The national idea was given collective content by Enlightenment writers who discerned

3 A relevant work which came to my attention too late to use in this essay but which pursues similar themes is Leersen 2006, especially the section on the nineteenth century, 'The Politics of National Identity'.

4 I list here a few relevant works on pre-1800 ideas of nationality: Bell 2001; Fehrenbach 1986; Scales and Zimmer 2005; Schönemann 1997.

stages of history, portraying progressive 'nations' bringing together political institutions and the national spirit or character. More strongly, early romanticism linked nation to collective cultural identity embodied in language, customs or values. These ideas acquired force in the late eighteenth-century revolutions in the Americas and France where the 'nation' legitimised a new state.

3 The nation as civilised

France: la grande nation

The principle of nationality initially combined high culture, individualised property rights and constitutional government. It was given sharp expression in the early phase of the French Revolution. Aspects of this liberal view of nationality were marginalised with the conversion of politics into warfare and the stress on virtue as heroic public action rather than conscientious attention to private life. This shift was acutely analysed by Benjamin Constant. He formulated a distinction between ancient and modern liberty meaning freedom *in* and *from* the state. A constant puzzle for Constant was to explain the aberration of the Jacobin/Napoleonic period with its 'ancient' stress on public virtue and heroism.[5]

French nationality came to be expressed as *la grande nation* (Godechot 1956). The concern for order marginalised democratic and republican versions of nationality. Liberal nationalists after 1815 could not disavow the Revolution although they sought to explain away 'aberrations' such as terror and wars of conquest. Liberal historians presented national history as progressive and civilising and France as a model for other nations. The liberal principle of nationality was deployed against radicals and royalists. It reached its apogee with the July Monarchy. Writers who expounded this view exercised political power, most notably Guizot (Crossley 1993).

Radicals formulated an alternative principle of nationality. Seeking inspiration from Jacobinism – with its universalist political language, classical models and its scornful dismissal of the rubbish of French monarchical traditions – presented intellectual challenges. This challenge was confronted by Jules Michelet. Michelet understood the nation as the source of spiritual values in the modern era, replacing the Church. He infused the thin notions of reason and progress with emotion, making a religion of national history

5 See Constant's essay 'The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relationship to European Civilisation' (Constant 1988c). See also the essay in this book by Jeremy Jennings.

which he set within a universal historical framework. Themes of struggle, defeat and resurrection made national history understandable and attractive to a Christian readership while avoiding confessional forms. Michelet overcame 'civic' and 'ethnic' distinctions, presenting the modern French nation as a triumphant combination of Celtic, Germanic, Greek and Roman elements (Crossley 1993, ch. 6).

Nationality could be deployed by others. Louis Napoleon exploited the myth of Napoleon with massive success in his election victory in December 1848 and to justify his coup (with less success) in 1851. He invoked 'la grand nation' in promoting national causes abroad. But Bonapartism was an opportunist, ambiguous political phenomenon, difficult to relate to a coherent principle of nationality. Royalists were as yet unable to develop an influential principle of nationality.

The impact of the French Revolution in Europe

It has been claimed that the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars spread the principle of nationality beyond France. The universal mission of *la grande nation* was unattractive in the form of military imperialism. Opponents of Napoleon argued that the only way to defeat him was to emulate his mass mobilisation and warfare. This included appeals to the nation. In rejecting arguments about universal reason and the superiority of civilised nations to backward ones, thinkers formulated arguments about nations as unique and natural (Dann and Dinwiddy 1987).

This view is misleading if it means there was significant popular resistance to Napoleon inspired by the national idea. The most effective responses to Napoleon involved more efficient use of old institutions and values, such as a rejection of godless revolution by traditionalist clerics. Furthermore, Enlightenment reformers imported French principles like individualised property rights and functional state ministries. Democratic and romantic nationalists were marginalised, even if their rhetoric was exploited by governments. Where Napoleonic rule stimulated popular resistance it was guided by traditional values which did not sit easily with the principle of nationality; where Enlightenment or romantic ideas of nationality were significant, they were confined to elites. Subsequent nationalist myth-making exaggerated the importance of elite nationalism and popular resistance and yoked them together (Rowe 2003).

However, so far as nationalist doctrine is concerned, Napoleonic imperialism stimulated new ideas which, even if not politically important at the

time, later had a major impact. These are associated with German political romanticism, and especially Herder and Fichte. Herder reacted strongly against Enlightenment judgements with their distinctions between backward and advanced, progressive and reactionary. He particularly detested Voltaire whose historical-moral balance sheets he constantly denounced. Herder stressed the *uniqueness* of nations. This was based primarily upon incommensurable languages but Herder extended this argument to other social practices. Instead of national character as the outcome of common conditioning (the view of David Hume 1994a) it was understood as animating spirit or principle.[6]

Herder died before Napoleonic imperialism reached its peak. His anti-Enlightenment, anti-French arguments resonated with some German elites. The most striking adaptation of his ideas to the new political situation came in lectures given by Fichte in the French-occupied city of Berlin in 1807, the 'Addresses to the German Nation'. Fichte identifies Germans as the only Teutonic nation which has retained its authentic language, an original language unlike any other. There are important arguments as to how far Fichte's nation is ultimately an ethnic one or only a cultural-linguistic one or even a civic one. Irrespective of this, Fichte's preoccupation with a natural, pre-political group, pushes the principle of nationality to a clear and extreme conclusion. However, his dilemma is that this nation has forgotten its true self (hence the inability to resist the French conquest) but this can be restored through education, building on the collective identity which resides in its language. Subsequently, other intellectuals like Jahn and Arndt sought to embody 'Germandom' in gymnastics and military volunteers, and also expressed a virulent anti-French hatred.[7]

Fichte's lectures were permitted by the French censor. They were delivered to a closed, elite audience and preached education and language reform, not guerrilla warfare or popular insurrection. They had little influence at the time. Herder's ideas, with their focus on folk culture, peasants and artisans, had more influence on small nation nationalism. In Germany it

6 A good place to start is with an English translation of Herder 2004. Here is perhaps the first use of the term 'nationalism': 'Every nation has its *center* of happiness within itself, as every ball has its center of gravity! . . . Likewise any two nations whose inclinations and circles of happiness *collide* – one calls it *prejudice*, *loutishness*, narrow *nationalism*' (Herder 2004: 29). On Herder see Barnard 1965, 2003.

7 On interpreting Fichte see Abizadeh 2005. For the original German text of the Addresses see Fichte 1845, and for an English translation see Fichte 2008. A very recent study of Prussian reactions to Napoleon is Hagemann 2002.

was a liberal fusion of progress and cultural nationality that dominated nationalist discourse for much of the century.

Britain: civilisation rather than nationality

In post-1815 Europe the liberal national principle combining high culture, individualised property rights and constitutional government dominated. One might think this would have the greatest influence in Britain where institutions most closely corresponded to this principle. However, while French liberal nationality was expressed in a combative language against threats of revolution and counter-revolution, in Britain it retained the empirical character associated with Hume. British political thought stressed civilisational achievement through the formation of individual elite character (Mandler 2006, especially 'Introduction'). The national idea was too enveloping, too democratic and inclusive, too continental. After 1848 British political thinkers discerned national genius to reside in empirical, common-sense behaviour and piecemeal reform (Grainger 1979). This came out of a complacent reading of the outbreak of revolution on the continent compared to the failure of the Chartist challenge in 1848.[8] An alternative view of nationality as inclusive, although expressed through heroic leaders, was formulated by Carlyle but had little influence, except in contributing to the admiration for the leaders of foreign nationalism such as Kossuth and Garibaldi.[9] This view also explains the lack of attention to constitutional arrangements; explicit design was a continental concern, inferior to an 'unwritten' constitution. Forceful moral-political argument in Victorian England came from radicalism and evangelical Christianity, not from nationalism (Mandler 2000). As groups excluded from the 'nation' (i.e. the parliamentary franchise) acquired the empirical qualities of their betters, they could be admitted. Thus franchise debates were argued in terms of 'respectability'. Democratisation was written into history as national progress but avoiding a doctrinaire or conflictual language. Thinkers who deplored these values as complacent, muddled and ethnocentric – John

8 One can date almost precisely the change of establishment mood from a *Punch* cartoon of just before the Chartist demonstration full of anxiety to one after the demonstration mocking Chartism as ridiculous. See *Punch*, 14/353, 15 April 1848 and 14/355, 29 April. These are reproduced in Breuilly 1998a. This can be accessed online. One current web link to the two cartoons is: http://web.bham.ac.uk/1848/comments/punch.htm.

9 Mandler 2006, p. 69 quotes Mazzini's criticism of Carlyle: 'The shadow cast by these gigantic men appears to eclipse to his [Carlyle's] view every trace of the national thought of which these men were only the interpreters or prophets, and of the people, who alone are its depositary.'

Stuart Mill, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold – actually reinforced by their criticism the sense that this *was* how nationality worked in Britain (Collini 1988; Varouxakis 2002). In this way the idea of the nation as inclusive was developed but concepts of cultural identity and national character were fragile, always likely to be trumped by those of civilisation, elite leadership and Christianity (I largely follow Mandler 2006).[10]

4 The nation as historic

Discourse

Beyond Britain and France there was not the convergence of high culture, market economy and parliamentary government which nationality as civilisation (missionary or empirical) could claim both to describe and justify. Instead the civilisational perspective of history was projected into the future.

Such ideas were taken up by elites claiming to act on behalf of culturally dominant nationalities. German and Italian nationalists claimed a national high culture worthy of respect; it remained only to bring this into a national state (Breuilly 1996, ch. 2; Riall 1994). Magyars in the eastern half of the Habsburg Empire, haunted by Herder's prophecy that they would be ground between the mills of German nationality above and Slav nationality below, in 1848–9 demanded autonomy from Vienna and assertion over non-Magyars, including in this national programme notions of commercial improvement and land reform (Barany 1968; Okey 2000, ch. 4). Polish nobility demanded freedom from Romanov, Hohenzollern and Habsburg rule on the basis of aristocratic nationality, although to appeal to liberal British and French opinion this was presented as a progressive movement for liberty (Snyder 2003).

Historic nationality claims assumed a close connection between domination and culture. In Britain and France this was asserted over Celtic regions. Political integration was at elite level. Welsh borderland gentry and the bourgeoisie of Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow and Edinburgh could be assimilated into the national ruling class. Mid-nineteenth-century France still had large numbers of non-French speaking subjects but provincial elites were thoroughly French in culture and political outlook.[11]

10 For a stimulating comparative study of the intellectual treatment of notions of 'national character' in nineteenth-century Britain and France see Romani 2002.

11 Weber 1976 has long been cited to establish almost as beyond dispute the lack of a standard national culture in France before the late nineteenth century. However, Weber's work may well have exaggerated diversity (e.g. it was common for elite figures to be bilingual in the local language and French)

Cultural division became a problem with democratisation. There was a demand to enforce English or French culture at a popular level. The Restoration regime of post-1815 France did not relax this policy, even if national culture was seen in Catholic and hierarchical rather than secular and democratic terms (Lyons 2006). John Stuart Mill argued that the assimilation of small, backward, peripheral cultures (Bretons, Welsh) to the dominant culture was necessary to create the public consensus needed in a liberal democracy. Mill's arguments were influential at the time and have been much discussed recently.[12]

Mill defines nationality so as to include a political demand:

> A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality, if they are united among themselves by common sympathies, which do not exist between them and any others – which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves, exclusively. (Mill 1977b, p. 546)

This leads Mill to argue for the political separation of nationalities:

> it is in general a necessary condition of free institutions, that the boundaries of governments should coincide with those of nationalities. (Mill 1977b, p. 548)

However, Mill qualifies this proposition, for example in relation to geographical distributions of national populations. Lord Acton attacked Mill's argument, demanding the continued distinction between culture (nationality) and politics (independence) (Acton 1907b).

My concern is not with the presumption that a polity requires one national culture under conditions of representative democracy, but with Mill's related argument about civilisation. Mill thought that if a civilised minority ruled a less civilised majority, one could not have democracy, a position he took with regard to British rule in India.[13] Where civilised nations lived side-by-side, there should usually be political separation. Mill supported political autonomy for French Canadians on this ground (Varouxakis 2002, p. 18). However, where a civilised majority ruled a backward minority Mill's prescription was not political separation but cultural assimilation. As his most notorious passage on the subject put the matter:

and told us more about differences at the level of popular culture rather than that of elite culture or politics. For more recent studies of such issues see Ford 1993 and Lehning 1995.

12 The principal text is Mill 1977b, in particular Chapter XVI, 'Of Nationality, as Connected with Representative Government'. Varouxakis 2002 provides a reliable analysis. For recent normative arguments which draw on Mill see Miller 1995.

13 He knew India well, both his father and himself having worked for the East India Company.

> Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly refined and cultivated people – to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity and *prestige* of French power – than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation. (Mill 1977b, p. 549)

We must not project contemporary understandings on to this passage. Mill was not arguing that all Breton or Welsh customs ('ways of life') be swept aside. This passage long precedes the age of mass culture and interventionist states with an extensive realm of 'public' culture and a restricted private culture. Nevertheless, this was a time when moves towards compulsory schooling in Britain raised questions about the language of instruction, indeed even how 'proper' English was to be spoken. More important is the impact of such thinking in Central and Eastern Europe.

Mill's view derives from established contrasts between the civilised and the backward but acquired new urgency with democratisation. In Central Europe 'nationality' as political concept was connected to high culture. To be a 'Pole' in 1600 was to be a privileged member of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. So Mill's arguments could be taken up by privileged groups in the political conflicts that became acute in 1848. For liberal audiences of Mill's persuasion, it was important that advocates of national causes – Greek, German, Polish, Hungarian, Italian – establish not merely that their nation existed but that it was civilised.

This acquired additional force in Central Europe with arguments about history. Hegel had taken the idea of progress and made it into world process. He notoriously asserted that Africa 'had no history'. Hegel has been roundly criticised but it was a pioneering effort to construct world history, envisaging a key nation at the centre of that history in each epoch.[14]

Such ideas were applied to mid-century Europe with the distinction between 'historical' and 'non-historical' nations. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used the distinction to justify support for or opposition to conflicting national claims (Cummins 1980; Nimni 1991; Rosdolsky 1986). It has

14 'Passing judgement on it [Hegel's 'dialectic of national minds'] today requires little effort, but it is all too easy to forget that, in spite of its metaphysical arbitrariness, this represented the first attempt to master intellectually the apparent chaos of historical events and to comprehend human history as a *developmental* process that made sense and followed its own laws' (Rosdolsky 1986, p. 130). For an English translation see Hegel 1975a.