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THE MODERN NATION: A PLATITUDE, CONSTRUCTION OR INVENTION?

It seems that the dispute over what constitutes a nation and what is its genesis will never end. Each wave of xenophobia, each manifestation of hatred of 'the other' group translates into a language of 'nationalism' and awakes militant anti-nationalists who claim that a nation is solely a product of nationalism, that it is, in other words, a construction which should disappear as soon as nationalism has been eradicated. Simplified as this observation may be, it accurately expresses the state of a chronic, never-ending discussion in which now and again terms like 'perennialism', 'modernism', 'primordialism' and, most recently, 'ethnosymbolism' may be heard. Some use the terms interchangeably but always deprecatingly, others treat them as neutral labels. I have been following the dispute for many years and I have come to the conclusion that the discrepancy between the respective –isms is not as great as their proponents would have them; their supporters' main objective is to be more conspicuous, more distinctive, to demonstrate their originality. A fresh perspective and a morally uncompromising approach are more important to them than matter-of-fact correctness. It is one of those disputes where intellectual exhibitionists and moralists feel at home.

Therefore I intend to prove, concisely and possibly also provocatively, that there is not as dramatic a difference between the opposing conceptions as we are told. I will try to prove that a modern nation is both a community which could not have come into existence without being deeply embedded in the past and a community which changed and formed particularly as a result of modernisation of the whole society, and so would be unthinkable without the contribution of enthusiastic agitators. References to the past and to ethnic specificity gained the status of symbols of national existence.

I will quote two examples to support this thesis. In the introduction to his observations on 'nations and nationalism', Ernest Gellner states categorically that nations are products of nationalism, and not vice versa. A considerable part of his reflections which come after that statement pertain to the question why nationalism originated and became so popular. The author concludes that it happened as a result of social transformation, which he symbolically terms 'industrialisation'. Having read the introduction only, many popularisers interpret Gellner's *bon mot* in their own way: that nations were created as a result of a decision of 'nationalists', who usually come from among frustrated and power seeking intellectuals. Since they have never read the book, they are unperturbed by the fact that this is the very view which Gellner challenges in his text.

Another example: Benedict Anderson titled his often quoted book *Imagined communi-*

ties[1]and meant modern nations by it. He expressed the view that a premise on which national identity is formed is the individuals' ability to imagine themselves as part of a greater community, the majority of whose other members they will never meet or get to know. He adds, moreover, that the said ability of the imagination is not inborn but results from the process of modernisation, better education and social communication, and that the beginnings of that process go back to the times of Reformation and the invention of the printing press. Still, it did not discourage radical 'constructivists' from accepting Anderson as one of their own; the German rendition of the title of the book is 'invented communities'[2].

Here I find it important to quote the trivial, but often overlooked notion from basic methodology: to 'construct' means to build SOMETHING out of SOMETHING. In other words, a construction uses objective data, while to 'invent' means to create SOMETHING out of NOTHING. If we apply the above principle to the creation of a modern nation as a 'construction', each conscious conception of the nation and its past is a construction. In order to assess it and to trust it we should ask ourselves two questions: firstly, what elements the

[1] *Imagined Communities:Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London: Verso 1991
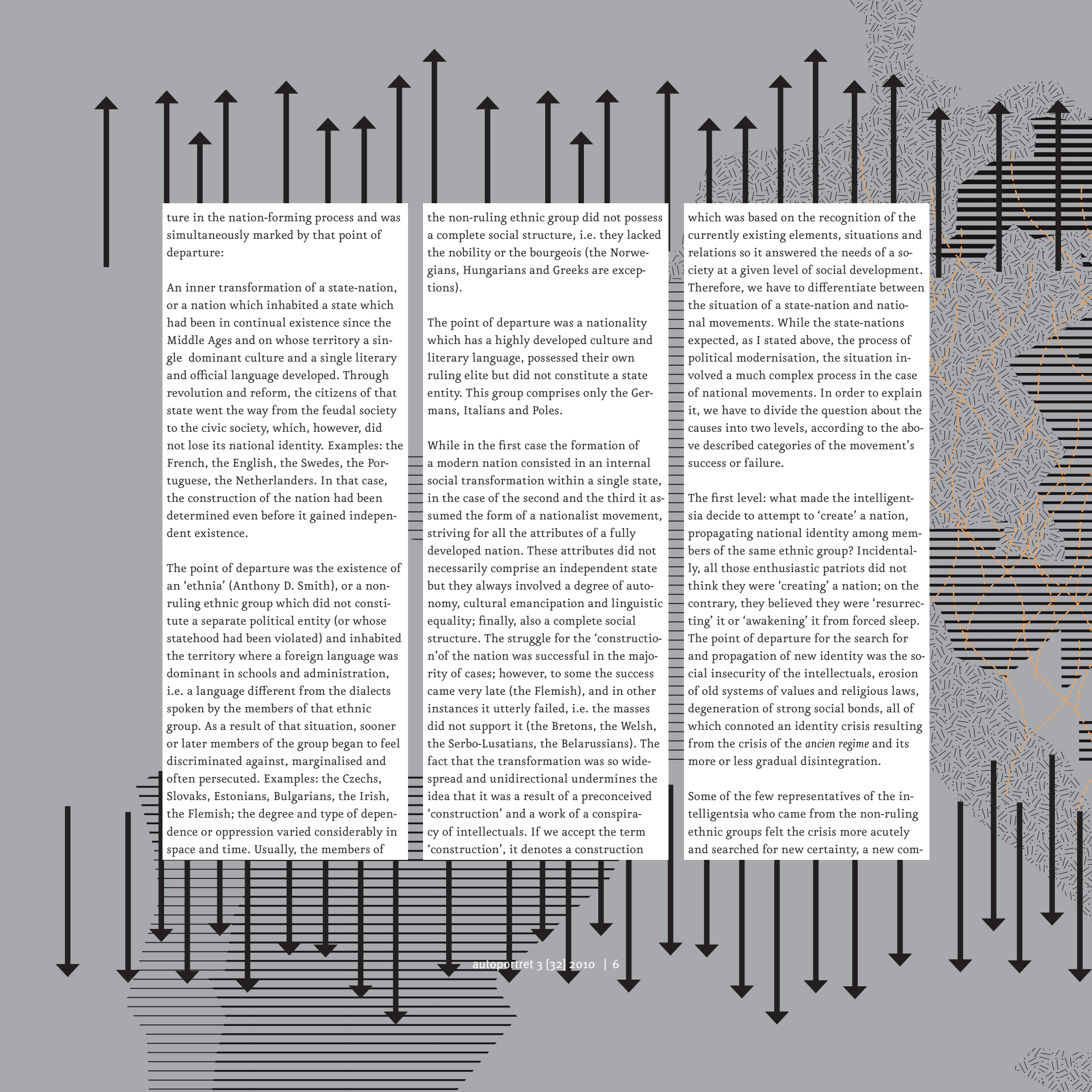[2] *Die Erfindung der Nation. Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts* (editor's note).

construction was made of and how it originated; secondly, whether the elements are not invented but can hold up to historical analysis. If we proceed to the personal and narrative level, the question to be asked in the genetic analysis of the construction of the nation is, first and foremost, why someone chose to agitate for the nation at all, and then what elements, what intellectual heritage that agitation used. We believe that the proposal of national identity was not always and not universally accepted. Hence, depending on whether the agitation was successful or not, we have to reformulate the question on two different levels: firstly, why they engaged in it at all, and secondly, why the agitation was successful, i.e. why the new national identity was adopted.

We should make sure what exactly is meant here. Let us look at the map of Europe at the beginning of the 19th century and compare it with the situation two hundred years later. After 1815, i.e. after the end of Napoleonic wars, we can distinguish several independent European countries which had been in existence continually since the Middle Ages and possessed their own ruling class and a homogenous language of administration and literature for centuries. The biggest of these included France, Spain and England, the smaller were Portugal, the Netherlands and Sweden. On the other hand, there were also multinational kingdoms in which, although they had a homogenous ruling class and the langu-

age of administration, the majority of the citizens was divided into groups, different from the elites in power; these countries did not constitute political entities (and usually had no autonomy, either) and did not possesss a fully developed literature. The latter category is represented by three 'classical' examples: Austria, Russia and Turkey, and temporarily also Denmark and Great Britain. The third kind were the territiories where citizens possessed a shared, mature culture and literary language, and had formed intellectual and political elites but did not have their own statehood: the Germans, Italians and Poles.

On the contemporary map of Europe we can only see one multinational empire, Russia; the others are almost exclusively national states. The difficult cohabitation of more than one nation within one state can only be witnessed in Spain and Belgium, and even the more conspicuous, politically and culturally significant national minorities on the territory of another national state are essentially exceptions (the Russians in the Baltic states and Transnistria, the Hungarians in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia, the Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo).

What caused such a major transformation, which in the school idiom is usually referred to as the way from the Europe of states to the Europe of nations?   The typological answer to this question is relatively simple. The process followed three paths, each of which corresponded to the point of depar-

ture in the nation-forming process and was simultaneously marked by that point of departure:

An inner transformation of a state-nation, or a nation which inhabited a state which had been in continual existence since the Middle Ages and on whose territory a single dominant culture and a single literary and official language developed. Through revolution and reform, the citizens of that state went the way from the feudal society to the civic society, which, however, did not lose its national identity. Examples: the French, the English, the Swedes, the Portuguese, the Netherlanders. In that case, the construction of the nation had been determined even before it gained independent existence.

The point of departure was the existence of an 'ethnia' (Anthony D. Smith), or a non-ruling ethnic group which did not constitute a separate political entity (or whose statehood had been violated) and inhabited the territory where a foreign language was dominant in schools and administration, i.e. a language different from the dialects spoken by the members of that ethnic group. As a result of that situation, sooner or later members of the group began to feel discriminated against, marginalised and often persecuted. Examples: the Czechs, Slovaks, Estonians, Bulgarians, the Irish, the Flemish; the degree and type of dependence or oppression varied considerably in space and time. Usually, the members of

the non-ruling ethnic group did not possess a complete social structure, i.e. they lacked the nobility or the bourgeois (the Norwegians, Hungarians and Greeks are exceptions).

The point of departure was a nationality which has a highly developed culture and literary language, possessed their own ruling elite but did not constitute a state entity. This group comprises only the Germans, Italians and Poles.

While in the first case the formation of a modern nation consisted in an internal social transformation within a single state, in the case of the second and the third it assumed the form of a nationalist movement, striving for all the attributes of a fully developed nation. These attributes did not necessarily comprise an independent state but they always involved a degree of autonomy, cultural emancipation and linguistic equality; finally, also a complete social structure. The struggle for the 'construction'of the nation was successful in the majority of cases; however, to some the success came very late (the Flemish), and in other instances it utterly failed, i.e. the masses did not support it (the Bretons, the Welsh, the Serbo-Lusatians, the Belarussians). The fact that the transformation was so widespread and unidirectional undermines the idea that it was a result of a preconceived 'construction' and a work of a conspiracy of intellectuals. If we accept the term 'construction', it denotes a construction

which was based on the recognition of the currently existing elements, situations and relations so it answered the needs of a society at a given level of social development. Therefore, we have to differentiate between the situation of a state-nation and national movements. While the state-nations expected, as I stated above, the process of political modernisation, the situation involved a much complex process in the case of national movements. In order to explain it, we have to divide the question about the causes into two levels, according to the above described categories of the movement's success or failure.

The first level: what made the intelligentsia decide to attempt to 'create' a nation, propagating national identity among members of the same ethnic group? Incidentally, all those enthusiastic patriots did not think they were 'creating' a nation; on the contrary, they believed they were 'resurrecting' it or 'awakening' it from forced sleep. The point of departure for the search for and propagation of new identity was the social insecurity of the intellectuals, erosion of old systems of values and religious laws, degeneration of strong social bonds, all of which connoted an identity crisis resulting from the crisis of the *ancien regime* and its more or less gradual disintegration.

Some of the few representatives of the intelligentsia who came from the non-ruling ethnic groups felt the crisis more acutely and searched for new certainty, a new com-

munity which would not be based on feudal constraint and on the prisons of absolutism but on the rule of solidarity of all citizens as equal members of a new or a revived nation. On the one hand, overcoming the crisis oriented them towards the relics of old political units and institutionalised remains of their shared fate, and on the other hand – towards a culturally, ethnically and linguistically defined community. That orientation reflected primarily the experience of linguistically or culturally conditioned discrimination of members of their own ethnic elite in comparison with those who formed the ruling elites or were close to them.

What ideological elements did that orientation comprise? The oldest ones date back to the Middle Ages: on the one hand, the Judeo-Christian tradition frequently used such expressions as 'the chosen nation' or 'the promised land' and the notion of an ethnically defined enemy; on the other hand, there was the ancient ideal of the love of one's homeland, exemplified by both Athenians and republican Romans. We could further quote the humanistic rhetoric about the good of one's homeland and baroque patriotism. Rationalism of the Enlightenment and the idea of equality of all people may have been harmonic, or at least not at odds, with the older elements.

From my point of view, the most significant ideological source of modern thinking about the nation at the time of the Enlighten-

ment was the then concept of patriotism, which obliged the intelligentsia not only to make efforts to improve the living conditions (and the level of education) of the people living on the soil that they considered their own but also to examine these living conditions. Enlightenment scholars 'discovered' the specificity of different nations, constituted (or reconstituted) the norms of the native language, and studied the past and customs of 'their' people. It was in that context that Johann Gottfried Herder proposed his philosophy of linguistically defined national existence, whose significance, however, should not be overestimated. Scholars have often, but never systematically, used the term 'nation'. Their research helped to define its basic determinants, but their involvement in the project mostly did not go beyond the enthusiasm for the subject of the research itself. Enlightenment patriots did have their limitations, to be sure: although they generally acted for the people and their good, the majority of them did not feel they belonged to it, even if in theory they professed the principle of equality of all people.

It was only a generation later at least that a group crystallised among the intelligentsia who considered themselves an integral part of their people, and endowed the people with the qualities of the future nation. Within the majority of European national movements the main determinants of the nation were first and foremost a shared language and literature in that

language, followed by a shared past ('fates of the nation') and sometimes also religion. It was the intelligentsia that felt acutely the identity crisis of the *ancien regime* and started to look for ways to form a new type of community: the community of a nation who was not aware of its existence and so should be informed about it or persuaded to accept the necessity of its existence. It should be added that the new generation of the nationally conscious intelligentsia recruited from the non-ruling ethnic group. In consequence, the foundation of their activity was an educational situation which allowed access to education to children from the lower, unpriviledged social classes.

The new generation of patriots started political agitation in the name of their imagined idea of the nation but it would be erroneous to assume that their visionary enthusiasm was equal to the reality of educating a modern nation. The conditions for adopting a new cultural construction lay elsewhere. Thus we reach the second level of our analysis.

Each idea, each project, including the construction of a nation, may be efficient only inasmuch as that it reaches the people to whom it is addressed. In other words, people may (or may not) adopt a new national identity but only after it is proposed to them, i.e. after they become familiar with it. The prerequisite for the propagation of national identity was a properly developed

system of social communication. The intensity of social communication in turn did not depend on the good will of the patriots but on the advances of the modernisation processes. These included increasing horizontal mobility: regular traffic and interactive contacts between people which went beyond the confines of the village, residence or city. They could be regular visits to the market, travels in search of work, or military service. Another factor was the improvement of infrastructure (including postal services) and reinforcement and rationalisation of the state and regional administration. Administration was more and more present in the everyday lives of citizens either in the form of the increasingly more complicated tax system or the progressively more efficient judiciary; it could also be felt in economic development and health care. Another important indicator of communication was obligatory schooling, whose significance did not pertain merely to the issue of literacy which was an integral part of the teaching programme. Although its main objective was to discipline the common man in the spirit of the state (but sometimes that of the country, as well), it also entailed dissemination of knowledge about the country and the outer world. The growing accessibility of higher education, especially in cities, was another vital factor.

All the above mentioned communication processes played one role in the circumstances where they functioned first and foremost as discipline tools for the state policy (particularly in the case of state-nations), and quite another role in the social environments where the agitating elements within national movements entered the sphere of communication 'from the bottom up'. Hence, compulsory education may have been simply a state directive but it gained the national agitating force where the state was nationally indifferent and showed tolerance towards the propagation of national culture or teaching in the language of a non-ruling ethnic group. It was owing to this that the proposition of national identity for members of the non-ruling ethnic group was incorporated in the system of education.

As we said before, the importance of literacy tuition is not to be overestimated. It grew only when the proposition of national identity went into print, mainly due to the liberality of the ruling state apparatus. Obviously, freedom of the press did not automatically vouch for a success of the agitation. The opportunities appeared only when the periodicals had a sufficiently wide circulation. In this respect the increasing wealth of some strata of the non-ruling ethnic group was of no small importance.

Folk celebrations and public gatherings seem to have been another useful tool for national agitation as a social communication platform. It afforded agitators the opportunity to address also those compatriots who did not have access to the written word because they were illiterate or because they had limited access to periodicals. Clearly, the celebrations could take place only once the most basic forms of civil rights were established. In the case of the majority of national movements it happened only in the second stage, when the idea of national identity had already been commonly accepted. Although the importance of these celebrations for the adoption of national symbols and propagation of national rhetoric is undisputable, yet they cannot be considered the main or decisive factor in the nation-forming process. Let us remember, for instance, that a funeral or celebration of an eminent public figure's jubilee could only be significant if at least a basic part of the citizens, members of a nation *in spe*, already knew and revered that personage, i.e. associated him or her with certain positive values. This stipulation concerns to an even greater degree celebrations commemorating some crucial, famous or infamous, historic events in the nation's history. Analysing celebrations and other emotive tools for national agitation helps us understand HOW national agitation was conducted, what resources it used, but not WHY it was successful. Moreover, in (Western) European research the momentum it gathered among the great and wealthy nations, like the French or Germans, is sometimes attributed to all European movements. It is an obvious mistake as leaders of the majority of national movements did not have the resources necessary to organise mass

celebrations so they resorted to more modest events: jubilee celebrations or funerals of personages who rendered great services to the national movement, festivals whish were nationalist in character, nationalistic peasant pilgrimages and sometimes even church celebrations. In order to explain the formation of a modern nation in general and the success of national movements in particular, it does not suffice to point out the importance of social communication. It can be best illustrated by the phenomenon of the unevenness of the nation-forming process. If the 'modernising' paradigm existed without exceptions, national agitation in the more developed (even industrialised) regions ought to have been conducted earlier and should have met with mass interest. National movements should have come into being in the more developed countries first, and in the more backward ones – later. But that was not the case. Let us remember that national movements and the decisive stage in the modern nation-forming process happened synchronically (i.e. at the very same time, according to absolute chronology) in the developed Germany and agrarian Greece, in protoindustrial Bohemia and in rural Hungary. The national movement arose in the developed Catalonia simultaneously with that in backward Ukraine. Empirical data shows that successful formation of a modern nation did not in itself constitute a criterion of progress or backwardness. Intensity of social communication and the degree of industrialisation are not sufficient to

explain the synchrony of national movements. That is why it is necessary to return to social communication, and especially to the reverse side of its range: information circulation had not only its sources and its tools but also its addressees. So far we have based our reflections, as the majority of scholars, on the premise that an individual member of a potential national community was more or less intensely bombarded with information of national importance, mobilising him nationally; in other words, that s/he was a kind of 'tabula rasa' or simply a subject of national acivists' interest.

However, that premise is imprecise. In reality the decisive factors were the talents and qualities of the individual who was offered by the national movement (and sometimes also by the authorities) the proposition of national identification as a binding relation to the national community. Only an individual who was able to imagine that in the vast territory, which s/he could never traverse from one end to the other, there lived a numerous group of people whose nationality s/he shared and together they formed a national community even though s/he would never meet the majority of them face to face, could accept and assimilate the conviction that s/he belonged to a national community, that identification with such a community was a value. From my point of view, Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* is convincing and definitely cannot be used as an argument for the notion of the nation as

an artificial construct; on the contrary, it helps us to understand the importance of objective relations and realities, i.e. those independent of the wishes of the then national activists. In our case, the point is primarily the ability to think conceptually: the term 'nation', if understood as a community and not an institution, is just such an abstraction.

Psychology teaches us that abstract thinking is not inborn but develops when a child grows into an adolescent, and that it does not happen automatically but as a result of a certain education. An individual without the ability of abstract thinking or elementary education cannot accept the construction of a modern nation as a duty and a value but tends to adopt an atavistically xenophobic attitude. Such attitudes are quoted by sources from the early Middle Ages onwards. We can observe them in an almost lab-like form in some conflicts going on in the less developed parts of the world, although they are often labelled with the European terms for the nation and nationalism.

It would be a simplification to claim that 'a nation' was the first abstract notion that people encountered at the time of nation-forming. If we leave aside repeated and variously updated biblical tales of the chosen nation or the Babel tower, we should first and foremost evoke the idea of 'land' and the Enlightenment notion of 'homeland' as positively marked concepts with which it

was possible to identify. I would go as far as to claim that the abstract term 'nation' may have spread much easier in the places where people had already been used to the idea of 'homeland', although the latter was related to the ruling dynasty and was instilled in the subjects in the process of school education. It follows that even the best homogeneous construction of a nation and national identity was doomed to mere vegetation among academics if it was not preceded with conditions favourable for its reception among citizens from all social classes. It is not only that the construction is always based, as we have written above, 'ON SOMETHING' but also that it can start to function only where there were preconditions for it to be accepted by the masses: in other words, it had to be intelligible, convincing and able to be applied in everyday life.

Let us quote the example of the construction of the Czechoslovak nation, which dates back to the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and became the official foundation for the interwar Republic of Czechoslovakia. Eventually, it turned out that there were no sufficiently strong historical and social premises for the construction in comparison with the construction of an independent Slovak nation, which finally gained support of the majority of the citizens. The citizens belonging to the Slovak nationality to whom the proposition of Czechoslovak identity was addressed had had a thousand years of shared past which

separated them from Czechs, in addition to the geographical location and the orientation of social communication.

Although behind the scenes of political struggle dark political forces were partly at work as well, the Slovak national identity was becoming increasingly popular among the citizens who had nothing in common with fascism.

Let us return to the question what circumstances, correlations or historical processes, apart from the above mentioned contribution of individuals and social communication, lay the necessary foundations for the propagation of national identity or, if we like, for the construction of the community of a modern nation. Two other factors must be mentioned here: a conflict of interests, with momentous consequences for the nation, and an 'external factor'.

If the process of spreading the proposition of new national identity was to be successfully completed, it was vital for its acceptance that the national arguments, describing the nation in one way or another, were in compliance with what a given individual or social group considered their interest. By the same token, a conflict of interests became crucial for the newly building nation. First and foremost, it required that one's own national group was defined in opposition to other gropus, the construction of US versus THEM. If a rival, competitor or enemy determined on the social,

political or economic basis, could be considered a national competitor, then the new identification with the nation understood as a loyal community gained considerably in its appeal. It transferred from the plane of intellectual entertainment to the sphere of everyday life of different social strata. A national enemy or competitor could be defined in diverse ways depending on what kind of the nation-building process was intended.

In the context of a non-ruling ethnic group sooner of later situations of national antagonism resulted from antagonisms between a farmer and his linguistically and culturally 'alien' superiors, which were reported in the Baltic states or in eastern Poland, antagonisms between the village and the ethnically alien (German, Polish or Jewish) town, between craftsmen (with their local market) and industrial production (with a huge market) if the latter was managed by representatives of the ruling state-nation. It could also be an antagonism between the centre and the provincial elites, or dissatisfaction resulting from existential hardships of the academic intelligentsia when they came from the non-ruling ethnic group.

The situation was different for the ruling nationality, in which case the role of the mobilising factor was, as a rule, played by the idea of an external enemy. That notion could be the most effective at the time of war or a threat of war – as was the case

at the beginning of the German national movement during the Napoleonic wars, in Denmark at the time of the German threat, in Italy at the time of the professed Austrian or Habsburg expansion. A classical example is the situation of 'motherland in danger' during the French Revolution, then again after the military defeats in 1870 and once more after the unification of Germany. The difference in the role of the conflict of interests resulting from modernisation is easily exemplified by the situation of a new social class – the proletariat – in the course of nation-building. In the context of state-nations the dominant ideology of the workers' movement was internationalism which rejected national mobilisation as a bourgeois tool: the bourgeoisie was part of the nation in the same way as the proletariat. Contrary to that, the working class, which belonged to the non-ruling ethnic group, mostly supported 'their own' national movement. Under tense war conditions the proletariat developed national consciousness also in the situation of a nation-state. Latvian shooters of Catalan anarchists are exceptions which confirm the rule.

The category of the external factor comprises a whole set of diverse circumstances and relations, particularly in the political sphere, which were independent of the wishes and ideas of national movements leaders. We can certainly quote the above mentioned military conflicts and international anatagonisms, which had a great impact on nation-states. For the national

movement a special external indicator became external support, resulting from the interest of some world powers in weakening a multinational empire or securing a position on the territory of national movements. The best known example in this context is the superpower support that the Greek (and later also the Bulgarian) national movement received from European superpowers. In the majority of European national movements support from outside came later, when the agitation stage had been successfully completed with the emergence of a national movement; in other words, everywhere where the national movement became a force to be reckoned with. In connection to this, it is necessary to realise that a vast majority of the newly risen nation-states in Europe were created on the strength of decisions made by European superpowers, or at least never against their will. It is equally true about Belgium, the Balkan states in the 19th century, and particularly about the new states which came into existence after World War I.

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Modern European nations are not only 'products of nationalism' or outcomes of intellectual ingenuity. They took decades to form in the process of more or less 'organic' interaction between mobilising aspirations of patriots ('nationalists') and ethnic relations, which were independent of them, relics of the past and modernising transformations within the European society.

National identification arose from a uniquely European combination of the above factors, and its propagation contributed to the formation of a new type of community: a modern nation understood as a community of citizens with equal rights, who are closer to one another than to other people. Doubtless, that kind of community would be impossible without raising national awareness of its members, which does not mean, however, that we are entitled to elevate the migration of ideas, a particular 'nationalism', to be exact, to the status of the *primus movens* of the whole social process. In theory, national identity was possible to invent but its actual implementation regardless of historical, cultural, linguistic and social conditions was not feasible.

ILLUSTRATIONS: ANNA ZABDYRSKA