

# The Nation, the State, the Nation-State

How do we talk about what we are?

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Let us be very frank. “Identity” does not really exist, at least not as an external object, out there somewhere in material reality. This may seem like a harsh statement to some, but think about it! If I look around me, beginning, let us say, with the clothes I wear, extending all the way to the building in which I live and to the environment that I inhabit, where do I find something that I can point to as “identity”? This observation should come as no surprise to Buddhists, for example, who understand, at least philosophically if not necessarily in the practice of their everyday lives, that ultimately nothing at all exists, and therefore, not even “identity”. And yet we look about us and more often than not we identify identity. It is a part of our discourse. We speak about our national identity. We are concerned with our personal identity. We recognise each other by perceiving our identities, as when we say, for example, that “his personality is such and such,” a reference to the particularities of that individual. In our contemporary world, all forms of identity are subject to inquiry and even doubt, but no identity is more contended in both theory and practice, in writing and in political action, than “national identity”.

The discussion about “national identity” has a long, and often even violent, history. People have sacrificed their lives or have been killed for their positions in the debate. Fortunately, people do not die on the printed page, although the printed page may serve as an excuse for self-sacrifice, and even for death. For the sake of brevity, we should begin the discussion with the question, “what can we say about the concept of nation? What are the *since qua non*, the most basic and essential constitutive elements, without which a human group cannot be called a nation?” I will argue that in the modern period, that is up to the beginning of what we now call “globalisation”, there were four primary constituent factors of a nation: language, territory, a common economic life, and a narrative. Before the modern period, or at least before the end of the Napoleonic wars in Europe in 1815, nations as we understand them today, did not exist anywhere in the world. And where nations and/or “nation-states” exist today, they were a consequence of the confluence of the four factors I have mentioned under

the particular circumstances of institutional and intellectual change that, beginning in Europe, most characterised the period of history extending from the collapse of the traditional empires beginning in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extending up to the years after World War II. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were many different kinds of political and cultural entities, but they were not “nations” in the contemporary sense of the term. And with the beginning of globalisation, the “nation” as a political and cultural entity became contested as the factors that constitute it, language, territory, a common economic life, and the narrative, themselves began to change.

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A nation is often characterised by sharing, or wanting to share, a common language. This is not to say that all nations do or must be characterised by a common language. For example, the common language of Ireland is English, not Gaelic (Irish), although at one point in modern Irish history the state encouraged the use of Gaelic as the national language. Irish culture became highly Anglicised over the years of English occupation of Ireland, but the Irish came to have a sense of themselves as a nation because of English oppression rather than their own linguistic singularity. The movement that led to the creation of the State of Israel used the revival of an ancient language, Hebrew, as an instrument to define a nation that would become institutionalised in a state. French, to cite another example, is the national language in France but also a national language in Belgium and Switzerland as well as in many of the now independent former colonies of France in Africa. So while we may speak of language as a characteristic of a nation, there is no objective congruence between a particular language and a particular nation. It may just as easily be an instrument for the creation of a nation as it is a form of national existence. What can be said with a degree of certainty is that some particular language is shared by a majority of the people who consider themselves members of a particular nation. The Irish are no less Irish for speaking English, and the Belgians who speak French as their mother tongue are no less Belgian than those who speak Dutch. In the contemporary world, where English has become not only the language of international intercourse but also the primary or secondary spoken language of so many nation-states, the relationship between language and national identity is broken, or at least no longer as clear as it once may have been.

Possession of a common territory is another characteristic feature of a nation, although it may be neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of a national identity. Moreover, there is no necessary correlation between the existence of an ethnic or national identity, on the one hand, and the possession of a common territory, on the other. Many of the characteristics we ascribe to nations today, with the exception of the possession of a national territory, are definitional of the type of socio-cultural organisation we call “tribes,” whether they be the tribes that historically roamed central Asia or the tribes that today in Africa often inhabit more than one state. It is no exaggeration to suggest that these tribes or nations possess territory but in terms different from those that are recognised by international law today. For example, nomadic tribes may roam in well-defined areas without identifying geographically with the territory in which they migrate. In Africa, many tribe-nations exist on territories that are ruled by different states, which makes them no less nations nor the states no less states. The Jewish people from approximately 70 CE to 1948 CE were a self-conscious, self-identified, group with some strong shared characteristics, such as a religion with a founding narrative, but lacked a shared territory; the history of the Jewish national movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the history of the development of territorial aspirations on the basis of which a nation-state came into existence. The territory of Switzerland contains people who speak four distinct languages, Three of them are also the dominant languages of the neighbouring nation-states; the Swiss identify themselves closely with the regions, the valleys, they inhabit, but the country has nonetheless created a strong national identity with which the people inhabiting the territory of Switzerland identify. In other words, it is also possible for people to have multiple identities linguistic, territorial, and political that are not necessarily congruent with each other. Today territory is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the existence of the nation.

Language and territory contribute to the development of the common economic life that is the third constituent component of a nation. Language was a significant factor in the development of the “national market” which was closely connected to the creation of the “nation-state”. A common spoken language facilitates trade. Today, for example, English is the language of international commerce, much to the discomfort admittedly, of some nation-states whose own languages are very strong elements of their national identities. Historically, the vast region that includes China, Korea,

Japan, and most of Southeast Asia used Chinese as a commercial and very often as a cultural language, and it facilitated the economic, cultural and even the political life of the area. At a certain point in European history, “national markets” began to coalesce, particularly with the beginning of the capitalist system, around “national languages” that were emerging from broadly spoken pan-European languages, like popularly spoken Latin, and from local dialects. Merchants naturally found it more convenient to trade with those with whom a shared language made the conclusion of contracts less ambiguous and simpler. As “national markets” began to develop and grow, the “state” as we understand it today developed in certain respects as a response to the need to administer the new national markets. With the expansion of international trade beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, colonialism intended the political and economic control of distant markets, and anti-colonial “nationalist” movements in their turn sought to wrest control of these markets from the colonial powers on the basis of a nationalism constructed from linguistic and cultural characteristics of a particular population within a more or less defined territory. Semi-colonial territories such as, say, China, sought to fend off colonial political encroachment by means of economic nationalism. Thus under different circumstances in different places, a common economic life becomes closely identified with the “nation”. It must be noted that with economic development and globalisation, in which some nation-states became dependent on other states or on international economic institutions for their economic survival and growth, the identity of a “nation” and its political expression, the state, might weaken as a result of the power of the new global international structures against which the nation-state must struggle to survive. The nation-state’s intention to survive as an independent and sovereign entity might conflict with the prerequisites and necessities of development and participation in the international economy.

Finally, a necessary though still not sufficient characteristic of a nation is the possession of a narrative accepted by those who claim identity through the nation as part of their common heritage. The use of the concept “narrative” itself requires some definition. It is, obviously, the speech about themselves that the members of a nation hold as a common possession. But that is far too abstract, and what is important is the content of that speech, that narrative. The contents may vary from nation to nation, and the weight given to one element may be different from that given to the same element in another nation. This is best explored briefly by examples. A nation defines

itself through the possession of an historical memory that is shared by its members. It is important to point out that this does not mean that they share a common history, only that they share a common memory of that history. That history may begin in mythological times, with beings arising out of miasmal marshes, or it may begin in relatively modern times with, say, a revolution like the French Revolution of 1789. It may be the historical memory (though not necessarily the memory of an historical reality) of a conquest or a religious conversion, or it may be rooted in an historical compact resulting in the creation of political institutions that characterise that nation vis-à-vis others. It also needs to be kept in mind that all the members of the nation today need not have been present through their ancestors throughout the period which the historical memory remembers. The world abounds in immigrants who move from one country to another and who themselves or whose descendants become “nationals” by mentally and psychologically adhering to the national narrative.

The national narrative is deeply rooted in national institutions, such as the educational system, the media, and in many cases religious institutions, which maintain the narrative as a foundation of historical definition but which also, in healthy societies, project the national narrative into the future, so that the narrative not only provides a basis for the community’s historical continuity but also for its sense of a shared future. For example, to the extent that economic, social and political development plans are made in consultation with the people through institutional or extra-institutional mechanisms so that the people, the national community itself, “possesses” the plans, these plans become the foundation for the projection of the national narrative into the future and, therefore, the foundation for the continuity into the future of the nation itself. The narrative must include both “tradition” and “projection.” Tradition alone, isolated from the future, denies the nation a future.

The power and significance of the narrative in the formation of the nation may be no better illustrated than through the example of India. In India, a land of many “nations”, the idea of India as an identity in itself, it can be argued, was the creation of Jawaharlal Nehru, who provided the Indian nationalist movement with an intellectual concept of India in his famous book, *The Discovery of India*, written from prison in the years 1942-1946, as letters to his daughter, Indira. He argued in the book that India was indeed a nation with a truly national history which gave it a right to

sovereign independence. This narrative of the “idea of India” transcended, without overly disturbing, the multitude of “national identities” that even today constitute the rich tapestry of Indian national life. It gave Mahatma Gandhi’s narrative of moral protest a profound historical dimension.

Language, territory, the economy, and a common narrative do not by any means exhaust the characteristics or phenomena that constitute a nation and the identity through which individuals adhere to it. But they seem to be the most significant in today’s world because they are the most embattled.

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It should be obvious by now that the hybrid expression “nation-state” refers to something quite distinct from either a nation or a state. Nations as such pre-existed the nation-state and, today, often exist within or between states. Similarly, the state arose as a phenomenon quite independent of the “nation” as we understand that concept in the modern world. The great historical empires were political institutions that managed the affairs, most often economic and military, of many different nations within their borders, and their borders were results of military conquest or political reach. The modern nation-state is the institutionalisation in political, military and economic terms of the self-consciousness of a nation that defines itself linguistically, territorially, economically, and narratively. Globalisation is a direct challenge both to the nation, through the possibility of its homogenisation into the cosmopolitanism that is a consequence of transnational economic institutions that know no borders, that tend to function in a single language, and that actively reduce the sovereignty of the nation-state in the interests of the movement of capital and commerce.

These issues are especially acute for a country like Bhutan. Consider the all too obvious fact that it is wedged in between the two largest states in the world. With only one of these does it share a common language, and that common language of intercourse is native to neither of them and plays no role in the constitution of national identity for either of them. The small size of its territory and population, characterised by a congeries of different communities distinguished by language, religion, ethnicity, and habitat, are themselves issues in the development of a common economic life and an inclusive narrative in which they can all share. “Bhutanese national identity,” it can be argued, is both a work in progress and a field

of contestation. Dzongkha, the national language, is not the native tongue of a majority of the population. Moreover, and this is a contentious point, it is written in an archaic form that in no way represents the oral language spoken either natively or secondarily by the country's population. The language of education is English and the real, if not legal, language of government work is also English. Under present circumstances, therefore, Dzongkha cannot serve as an inclusive marker or vehicle for national identity in the Kingdom. For that to be possible, the written language needs to be modernised and brought as close to the spoken language as possible. Moreover, a great effort must be made to develop literacy, literature, and, of course, teaching materials to promote a modernised language. This requires economic investment as well as intellectual leadership dedicated to the purpose. As is the case throughout the world, languages that do not require the vigour that only modernisation, together with intellectual and economic investment, can give them, tend to weaken and even disappear in the face of the onslaught of the language of globalisation, English, which commands enormous power. It is not by accident that by and large modern Bhutanese literature, for all the reasons one adduces, uses English as its primary language.

The development of a common economic life in the Kingdom must itself be the product of careful and measured economic growth. Two factors are of overwhelming importance in this regard. The first is the very size of the Indian economy in comparison with the Bhutanese. India tends to draw to itself the commerce, both import and export, from the more populated areas of Bhutan, the West and the East. The pace of "Indianisation" of the Bhutanese economy is fairly rapid. The second factor is the inadequate development of the internal factors that are necessary for the development of a common economic life, most importantly, roads and transport. The predominance of north-south highways in both the East and the West inhibits the growth of the common economic life that is so important for the development of a nation and its identity. Globalisation is considered by many to be a positive factor promoting economic development, but it is questionable whether even the highly developed identity of a small national economy will be able to withstand modification, if not dissolution, by the rapidly emerging global culture that is part and parcel of the global economy. In other words, economic development is not just about economic development and well-being. It is also about national identity, and very much so. Finally, the absence of a common and, most importantly, inclusive

national narrative must lead to further doubt about the future of Bhutan's identity as a nation as well as a state. The past is a reservoir of material for use in the narrative of the future, but it is not the same thing. The narrative of the future must be based, first, on a clear vision of what Bhutan can be in, say, fifty years from now. It must be a vision that takes into account the present reality and a pragmatic appreciation of its future potential. Most importantly, it must be a narrative that is inclusive of all the communities in Bhutan. Second, the narrative must lay out the instruments and policies through which the Kingdom plans to approach its own vision. This includes everything from five-year plans to educational curricula, seen through the optic of participation in the extraordinary 21st century. Determination, clear vision, intellect, and even emotional depth will be required.

We live in a world today in which the nation, the state, and the nation-state cannot be taken for granted. The international market economy with its own distinctive institutions and power has no innate respect for tradition, national identity or nation-state cohesion. But just as the key elements that constitute the nation and the state come into existence through human agency by means of which they also change in the course of history, so the very idea that they are constituted objects can be a source of liberation. Just as the constitution of national identity and of state citizenship is a product of human agency in history, so can the members of nations and the citizens of states, by the exercise of their own agency, determine their collective, collaborative, cooperative, communal future.