1 National Identity-Formation

Aspects of Nation-Building

Although the emergence of nationalism is long past in Western Europe, as is its peak, study in this field has experienced a new upswing in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ The breakdown of empires and the consequent end of the colonial era have doubtlessly contributed to this renewed scholarly interest. At the same time, the sense of nationhood proves to be one of the most important spurs in everyday political life throughout the world, even in political entities that have long developed a sense of nationality. Thus, the often predicted end of nationalism has never occurred and against this background it does not seem likely to come about, although Eric Hobsbawm claims that “the very fact that historians are at least beginning to make some progress in the study and analysis of nations and nationalism suggests that, as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak.”²

In the course of time, a large number of elements were considered as contributing to the establishment of a nation and its inhabitants’ national consciousness. Among those were race, language, religion, and geography, to name but a few. In his pivotal lecture “What Is a Nation?”³ delivered at the Sorbonne in

1882, Ernest Renan justifiably rejected these elements for their inadequacy, proving, for example, that there are nations with more than one official language and of mixed racial origin while at the same time the same language is spoken in different countries and can thus not be the sole constituent of a nation. He thus distances himself from the objectivist approach to nationalism when he moves away from the traditional belief that a nation’s character is determined by given outward factors and attributes the main responsibility of forming a nation to the inhabitants of a country:

Man is everything in the formation of this sacred thing which is called a people. […] A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.⁴

In addition, Renan makes the important point that a nation is nothing static, which, once established, remains unchanged; on the contrary, it has to be reaffirmed and formed anew every day. Consequently, it is necessary to examine a broader period of time. He also underlines the emotional factor in nationalism when he states that “nothing material suffices for it. […] A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.”⁵ This aspect appeared to be often neglected in late-twentieth-century theoretical approaches; and yet it incorporates one of the most significant issues – if not the most significant – of the nation. Renan’s emphasis on the decisive role of the people’s volonté commune⁶ in the process of nation-building – going back to Rousseau’s volonté générale – places him in the subjectivist tradition. Representatives of this approach claim

⁴ Renan, “What is a Nation?” 51–53. – “L’homme est tout dans la formation de cette chose sacrée qu’on appelle un peuple. […] Une nation est donc une grande solidarité, constituée par le sentiment des sacrifices qu’on a faits et de ceux qu’on est disposé à faire encore. Elle suppose un passé; elle se résume pourtant dans le présent par un fait tangible: le consentement, le désir clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune. L’existence d’une nation est (pardonnez-moi cette métaphore) un plébiscite de tous les jours” (Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” 903–904).

⁵ Renan, “What is a Nation?” 51–52. – “Rien de matériel n’y suffit. […] Une nation est une âme, un principe spirituel” (Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” 903).

⁶ Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” 904. – “common will” 52.