The Emergence of Nation-States

Hendrik Spruyt

Introduction
Historically, the emergence of nation-states involves several distinct but related processes: the hierarchical location of final authority, that is, sovereignty; the acceptance of the principle that such sovereignty is territorially demarcated and circumscribed; and nation building.1 However, the sequencing of these processes and the modalities through which nation-states have come into being have varied widely in practice. This essay discusses how these processes interacted and sometimes contradicted each other, and how some political communities have been able to create vibrant nation-states whereas others continue in their struggles to do so. Furthermore, I show how changes in the international environment have dramatically changed the pattern of how nation-states emerge.

States before Nations
Modern statehood arguably appeared by the early Renaissance. To be sure, many polities before had witnessed the mobilization and monopolization of force by governing authorities. In this sense they met the criterion of statehood enunciated by Max Weber that the state is that authority which legitimately monopolizes the means of coercive force (Weber 1978).

The modern state that finds its origins in late medieval Europe, however, differs in several respects. First, it establishes a hierarchical pattern of authority. A sovereign ruler or rulers stand at the apex of internal governance, while they recognize no higher external authority. Second, and conversely, external authorities recognize other states' internal autonomy and they make no claims to jurisdiction over another sovereign. Third, sovereignty became territorially demarcated. Governance stopped at the borders' edge.

None of these features were uncontested. Medieval Europe was dominated by fragmented feudal rule (Duby 1978; Strayer 1965). Contrary to the popular image of a feudal pyramid with the king at the apex ruling over various strata of lords, feudalism evinced heterogeneous, overlapping, contested sets of claims to governance. Ever since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century, authority had devolved to the local level, to bishops and warlords. The Carolingian revival of the 8th and 9th centuries restored a semblance of hierarchy and control, but dissent among the heirs to the throne and incursions by Muslims, Vikings, Magyars and, in the East, Eurasian cavalries, once again shifted political and military control back to the local holders of keeps and castles. Kings were at best primus inter pares, first among equally powerful lords. The French king, for example, was but originally the duke of an area around Paris.

At the same time, the German emperors of the late 10th century had come to see themselves as the successors to the Carolingian legacy. As such, they articulated a policy to restore the Roman Empire and for that they needed control of Rome itself. By the 11th century, however, a reinvigorated papacy following the Gregorian reforms resisted such German attempts to conquer Italy (Tierney 1964). Many independent cities of the Italian peninsula similarly resisted the German claims. A political contest thus emerged between the papacy and its allies and the German imperial allies. Both pope and emperor asserted their supremacy over the other. In order to bolster their claims they turned to Roman legal doctrines of sovereignty in which the sovereign was the source of law and thus supreme. Both asserted ultimate sovereignty and the legitimacy to rule the Christian community.

Amidst this two-way struggle of emperor and pope, kings started to re-assert their powers and re-centralize their fragmented realms. They were quick to adopt the imperial claims to supremacy, rex est imperator in regno suo, the king is emperor in his domain. But they laid no claim to rule beyond the borders of their holdings. Whereas in principle the supremacy of the emperor and pope had no boundaries (the imperial orb signified his claim to be ruler over all the world), the royal connotation of sovereignty meant autonomy from external rule, while recognizing limits to royal authority based on the spatial configuration of the realm.

The victory of the royal notion of territorial sovereignty has several causes. The emperor and the pope weakened each other through their conflicts, and had to make concessions to kings and
powerful lords. Moreover, military and economic developments facilitated centralization of their realms. Some scholars, such as Tilly (1990), tend to stress developments in warfare, whereas Spruyt (1994) emphasizes institutional changes which gave the territorial state advantages in warfare as well as economic affairs.

Thus states emerged as a political organization based on the sovereign control over a given territory but without the close identification of the populace with the state. The term nation was not unknown and had been used by the Romans to denote the various tribes they encountered in their conquests. In the Late Middle Ages it typically referred to the ethnic origin of student corporations who studied in the emerging universities.

But there was no sense of a nation as a group with a shared identity which wishes to give political expression to that identity in the form of its own state (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1980). Individual affiliations and identities lay with the family, clan or local village. The early states were rife with numerous different languages and dialects with Latin being the language of the elite. Most of the population would live and die in close physical proximity to their place of birth. Communications and transportation between different parts of the realm were difficult and sparse.

Forging Nations out of States
Although the principle of territorial sovereignty was first articulated by the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, it would take several centuries before it could displace alternate forms of organization. The Treaties of Augsburg (1555) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) both delimited the claims of emperor and papacy and clearly articulated the principles of territorial demarcation of authority; yet numerous semi-feudal elements of political and economic organization remained. Indeed, only the French Revolution and the Napoleonic reforms did away with most of these on the Continent.

The creation of a nation in the sense of a single “people” that identified with the territorially-defined polity would take longer still. Nation building involves not only the creation of a community that identifies with the state; it simultaneously required the displacement of rival forms of communal identity, such as kinship or clan. A modern nation after all is a community of individuals who are neither related nor personally known to each other. They form an imagined community (Anderson 1991).

This process was assisted by material changes in communications and transportation that affected the locus of identity. As individuals become aware of a larger community beyond their present one, new loyalties and antagonisms can emerge (Macfarlane 1978). Benedict Anderson thus places particular emphasis on the role of the printing press. Print not only facilitated written communication among the state’s inhabitants but provided the means to create identity. By using the print media and vernacular languages (as opposed to Latin), national identities could be forged based on claims of common ancestry and historical purpose.

Anderson’s very notion of an “imagined community” draws attention to rival understandings of identities as relatively primordial and essential or as something that can be manipulated. More often than not nation building involves a bit of both. Elites no doubt manipulated and indeed sometimes fabricated historical events and their recollection. Yet, for such manipulations to find traction in the population they often have to be partially based on pre-existing markers. Some of these markers might be more material than others, such as the existence of a shared language. Other markers, such as race, might appear as material but are in fact quite open to manipulation. Suny (1993) thus distinguishes objective and subjective categories of differentiation.

The European nations received further articulation by competition. National identities were defined through conflict and opposition to external enemies. English identity was defined through its wars with Spain in the 16th century, with local clergy warning of the danger of Catholic imperialism (Bendix 1978). Similarly, the British nation of English, Welsh and Scots was forged in the wars with France in the 17th century (Colley 1992). With wars omnipresent throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, national identities were forged by creating in-group cohesion vis-à-vis out-group enemies.

The military revolution of mass recruitment which emanated from Revolutionary France and the Napoleonic Wars raised this process to new heights (McNeill 1982; Parker 1988). The French Revolution challenged the dominance of monarchy, aristocracy, and clergy, in favor of egalitarian