Nations, Nation-Building, and Cultural Intervention: A Social Science Perspective

Raphael Utz

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I. Introduction

Nation-building has been one of the buzz words in the current debate on post-war Iraq and the efforts on the part of the international community to restructure or rebuild the country.¹ As an all-purpose term it is commonly applied to all attempts to alter the constitutional and political make-up of Iraq by either the Iraqis themselves, the Coalition, the larger international community or international organizations. They all, it would seem, are engaged in nation-building in Iraq. This usage of

the term, however convenient it may seem, obscures the complexity of the process it appears to refer to.

In fact, what the term nation-building usually avoids is the uncomfortable reality of a great number of processes – social, institutional, intellectual, ideological, and political – hiding behind this easy terminological solution. At the same time, however, the evasiveness of the term suggests that the issues at stake are somewhat greater and more complex than a mere restructuring or introduction of political institutions and legal frameworks: this would be called state-building and is an important part of any nation-building process. Nation-building, however, transcends the state and draws on many more sources than state-building does, because a nation is not a state, and even nation states are not necessarily coterminous with nations.

Therefore, the obvious point of departure for any analysis of what nation-building could reasonably be held to mean should be to offer yet another answer to the question: what is a nation? Following a brief summary of the ongoing academic debate about nations and nationalism, the process of nation-building itself will be presented and its central component described as the creation of a usable past. Since historians and sociologists have pointed out the close conceptual and chronological connection between the rise of nations and democracy, linked by the notion of popular sovereignty, a successful nation will then be defined as a democratic nation, before discussing elite consensus and

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2 One word on the terminology which will be used throughout this paper: the term ‘nationalism’ has acquired a thoroughly negative connotation in popular usage and even in academic discourse. It is commonly associated with the aggressive phenomenon of mass nationalism which spread through Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the explosions of hatred and violence of the two World Wars. In analytic terms, however, this does not appear to be satisfactory. Nationalism did not start at mass level and what we are actually looking at is a particular and later stage in the history of nationalism. What is meant by a ‘nationalist’ here is someone who is an adherent of the nation: someone who believes and accepts that nations exist and who is part of a society with a national collective identity. In this, the terminological usage of recent scholarship in history, political science, and sociology on nationalism following Liah Greenfeld is adopted.