Beyond Nation-Building: European National Histories Seen From Their Margins

1. Weak vs. strong nationalisation: images and realities

European historians have, in the past, believed in paradigmatic patterns of European history. Through the 1980s and 1990s, some historiographic traditions in Europe appeared to be obsessed with the existence of paradigmatic patterns of “historical normality”, as well as with the existence of “national deviations”, and specific paths to failed modernity. The latter were usually regarded as a deep source of exceptions, rooted in economic backwardness, state inefficiency, elites’ corruption and lack of vision, imperial crises, and great military defeats. While this historiographic discussion fuelled the development of the Sonderweg debate in Western Germany, historiographic developments in Southern Europe followed a parallel path, although they were often unaware of the similar discussions that were taking place in other countries. Thus, many Spanish historians from the late 1960s to the present, have argued that Spain’s political, social and economic evolution since the early 19th century was determined by a
threefold failure. First its failed industrial revolution, was unable to follow in the steps of British industrialisation. Second, its failed liberal revolution, which was incomplete in comparison with the French, and third, the failure in the process of modern nation building and state building, which was unsuccessful in relation to the idealised French model.¹

Similar debates took place among Portuguese and Italian historians from the late 1980s onwards. Italian historians often held the view that their country has been a “weak nation” (nazione debole) since the late 19th century, due to the lack of regional integration after the achievement of national unity through the Risorgimento process. The state’s lack of resources to modernise the country was aligned by colonial disaster (defeat of Adua, 1896) and late participation in the scramble for Africa, as expressed in the delayed conquest of Libya (1911). Portuguese historians, for their part, insisted on the importance of the turning point of the ultimatum crisis of 1890, when Great Britain imposed on the Lisbon government the abandonment of any claim to a Portuguese South Africa. This crisis, it was argued, fuelled the crisis of legitimacy of the Portuguese monarchy, the advent of the First Republic in October 1910, and the later political crisis that led to the authoritarian military coup of 1926.

In a similar way to the Sonderweg paradigm in Germany, the historiographic insistence on “Southern European” exceptionalism and backwardness was dominant through the 1980s and 1990s. The increasing fragmentation of the notion of European “normality” was triggered, however, by a number of historiographic and political developments, which progressively dismantled the historiographic pattern that implicitly differentiated between the Western path towards nation building through state building, social modernisation and cultural homogenisation, and the Eastern path towards national identity, based on exclusion, ethnic nationalism, and enforced cultural homogenisation through violence and conflict. The French pattern, based on Eugen Weber’s work on Peasants into Frenchmen (1976) was neither so successful, peaceful and free of coercion, as often perceived, nor was the East-Central European pattern, based on successive stages of nation building through social mobilisation, as suggested among others by Miroslav Hroch’s National Preconditions of National Revival in Europe (1985), as ethnocentric and “Eastern” as suggested.² Among the factors that contributed to change the mind of historians of nationalism, must be mentioned the incorporation of fresh comparative perspectives from East-Central European countries, the discussion about double, mixed and hybrid collective identities, the new approaches to region building, and local metaphors of the nation (Alon Confino),³ the adoption of global and post-imperial approaches, and, last but not least, the impact of Brexit since 2017. All these factors have contributed to a considerable re-framing of the historiographical discussion, as well as to question prior notions of what “exceptionality”, and what
This issue can also be addressed from a particular angle. Earlier debates on the existence of archetypal patterns of mass nationalisation and state-building processes in Europe as a whole have become less interesting for younger generations of historians. Some national historiographies, however, still seem to be focused on establishing the peculiarities of the weak nation building process of their home country. Recent debates on modern national and sub-national identity have achieved renewed visibility thanks to the Scottish (2014) independence referendum, as well as by the persistence of the Catalan conundrum since 2012, and the continuous ethno-national tensions characteristic of Belgian politics. The rise of a particular Northern Italian secessionism and the growth of ethnic nationalism in Corsica, which questions the overwhelming narrative of France being an undisputed example of successful nation building, provide additional examples of sub-national identity. Rather than being the exception, however, the Corsican case demonstrates the intertwined character of local and regional identities in the French case, as a model of “regionalised” nationalism, which ran parallel to the endurance of localism and illustrates the difficulties of claiming a monolithic version of national identity, at least until the outbreak of World War I. The Great War undoubtedly was the main factor that helped solidify and cement national identities in Europe. But the conflict was both a factor of nation building and of nation destroying, and even enhanced the emergence of regionalist and stateless national movements, such as in Flanders and Sardinia.

2. East and west, Europe and the world

Most national historiographies now tend to marginalise or even openly dismiss the “exceptionalism” approach to the national question, which was commonplace for most of them until the late 1990s. Among other innovative approaches to the study of nationalism, recent and renewed emphasis on transnationalism, on the hybridity and overlapping nature of regional and local identities, on the different modalities of everyday and banal nationalism, and the analysis of national identities from below, have contributed to tone down the prior conviction that prevailed in most European historiographies. These were, whether consciously or unconsciously, inherited from Hans Kohn’s work between the 1930s and the 1950s, which argued that there were two paradigmatic paths to nation building in Europe. On the one hand, the liberal way based on civic values and the consent of the citizens, leading to nation-state homogeneity, determined by the French model. On the other hand, the illiberal and ethnocentric path,
leading to ethnic conflict and national heterogeneity, that was purportedly prevalent in Eastern Europe.

Though special cases might have existed in both parts of the continent (such as Ireland in Western Europe), and no definite place was awarded within this scheme to vast areas such as Scandinavia, the imaginary line between Eastern and Western European nationalisms drawn by Kohn and some other classic historians of nationalism, such as Eugene Kamenka, Hugh Seton-Watson, and Konstantin Symmons-Symonolewicz, endured for many decades and survived the Cold War. The outbreak of the Yugoslav secession wars, as well as the ethnic conflicts that re-emerged in the Caucasus and in other areas of the former Soviet Union after its crisis and dissolution, seemed to confirm the original picture. From this perspective, the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe was a new expression of old ethnic hatred, inherited from earlier times, that had been stronger than Soviet and Communist attempts to create new proletarian homelands and overcome the “bourgeois” concept of nationalism.

This was just one side of the whole picture. The new look at the fascinating complexity of ethnic and national identities in Eastern Europe also uncovered the fruitful existence and coexistence of dynamics of double and hybrid patriotism, Landespatriotismus, multiple identities. Widespread forms of alternative identification were studied that were not exclusively based on ethnic nationalism, but on religious confession, local pride, dynastic loyalty, and attachment to the space of lived experience, from Russian rodina to the German Heimat. This also entailed a great diversity of alternative concepts of corporative home-rule, non-territorial autonomy, and non-nationalism as a common practice of many citizens. Cosmopolitanism was not an exclusive feature of Western European elites, and ethnic fanaticism was not an inevitable feature of East-Central European societies before 1939. Moreover, it was also highlighted that many Western Europeans learned lessons of linguistic revivals, self-government doctrines, and nationalist doctrine from their East European counterparts. This also happened the other way around. State building models implemented by the East-Central European successor states in the aftermath of World War I were directly or indirectly inspired by the successful nationalisation policies put in practice by Western European states, such as France.

Moreover, modern nationalism was far from being a uniquely European phenomenon. The American revolution in the 1770s, as well as the independence movements in Latin American republics between 1810 and 1826, and the development of “imperial nationalisms” in the periphery of the British Empire, beginning with Canada, and then South Africa, New Zealand and Australia in the late 19th century, illustrate new models of interaction. The later development of anti-colonial national movements in India,
Indonesia, some African countries, and Vietnam resulted from interaction of anti-colonial students and activists with the modern concepts of the nation and the ideas of social emancipation that flourished in the “(anti)imperial metropoles” (Goebel) of Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Vienna and Lisbon. These movements constituted further arenas of nationalist agitation, but also of interaction between imperial cores and colonial peripheries. There was also continuity between these earlier waves of nationalism with the new wave of third-world liberation movements and peripheral nationalisms in Europe, Africa and Asia between 1955 and 1975. Northern Irish Catholic activists learned from Gandhi and the North American tactics of the Black Power movement, while Corsican and Sardinian ethno-nationalists looked to Mozambique, Algeria, and even Cuba, in search for new concepts of the nation, compatible with the appeal to international solidarity and world revolution.

3. The endurance of national narratives

Acknowledging the complexity and hybridity of national, collective, and territorial identifications also meant new approaches to the way in which individuals reflected on those identities, including their ways of re-appropriating, interpreting and codifying the languages of belonging. Therefore, individuals were no longer regarded as passive recipients of narratives, symbols, and myths from above, whether from the state or from nationalist elites, social movements, religious agents, etc. Instead, they were analysed as pro-active participants in the process. What some authors named “personal” nationalism, learned and developed through everyday experience, tended to be seen as an interaction with nationalist narratives, and not only as a “nationalisation” of the masses triggered from state institutions and political movements. Recent developments in Spanish, Italian, French, and British historiography have emphasised the necessity of understanding the interplay between the national, the local, and the global from a much more nuanced angle. They have also left behind national exceptionalism, tried to avoid teleological interpretations (as if events in the past had to necessarily lead towards the achievement of full-fledged national sovereignty, which in many cases peaked in territorial expansion and the building of an empire), and understood nation-building processes as open-ended. This open-ended character was mutable and unstable, but also evoked many modalities of a common European history, where the weight of the nation-state and the driving force of national identity, nationalism, and national mobilisation constituted a defining feature.

Certainly, historical popular cultures have not always followed the same path. Popular histories, historical novels, and other literary genres kept their own pace and frequently
insisted on national exceptionalism. Widely read historical accounts penned by non-professional historians, novelists, journalists and writers constantly re-create the national past as a succession of great heroic deeds, painful defeats, and periods of resurgence. They continue to reproduce the classic scheme of national history codified in the 19th century (pre-roman or medieval origins, golden age, decadence, and resurgence), and overemphasise the role of heroes, martyrs, monarchs, and military leaders. Nuances in these national narratives are as numerous as the individual cases. Yet, the more nationalist narratives of the remote and recent past attempt to differentiate from each other, the more they resemble each other.

This paradox evokes what French cultural historian Anne-Marie Thiesse has ironically named the “Ikea model”. Nationalists use a number of pieces and resources that are available at a kind of global market of narratives, which are partly inspired by a number of successful models of nation-building since the 19th century, and simply combine those pieces trying to make them fit their own peculiarities. For example, pre-Roman myths of resistance against the invader can be found in many European national narratives. All of them remind readers of the classic icons of Vercingetorix and Herrmann. Moreover, examples of overseas expansion in coastal nations vary from the Vikings to the Lusitanian sailors and the Greek merchant diaspora. Old myths, such as the Risorgimento paradigm in Italian historiography, that presumes that Mazzini’s and Garibaldi’s national doctrines were examples of healthy and good patriotism, while everybody else’s national doctrines tended to exclusion and coercion, continue to be very alive among large sectors of Italian public opinion, including several sectors of the academic community.

4. Experience, emotions, and national identities

Historiographic discussions in East and West, North and South of the continent went on their own way, however, and moved in other directions that followed an opposite path. Recent trends in the history of nationalism and national identities are very influenced by the transnational turn, and increasingly tend to dilute or, at least, to question the exceptional character of the European continent. Transnational approaches to the history of nationalism and national movements are expanding and focus not only on the circulation of ideas and models of diffusion of national tenets, but also on the transatlantic and imperial dimensions of national identities.
Therefore, migrant diasporas, exiled communities, and imperial subjects are also seen under a different light. Moreover, as mentioned above, the ways in which individuals performed their own collective identifications and played a proactive role in shaping them have received new attention. Everyday nationalism and banal nationalism are now regarded both as cultural manifestations or routines dictated from above, and also as forms of appropriation and resignification defined by individuals with collective identities from below. This implies too seeing national identities as contingent objects, which are not the unavoidable result of modernity. Different forms of “national indifference” also accompanied the course of modern European history.\(^{14}\) The persistence of traditional forms of allegiance coexisted with new forms and spheres of identification that gained traction in the 20th century, from gender to class. Sometimes they interacted with national identities sometimes they did not. They even surfaced during the two world wars and in moments of intense nationalist mobilisation, such as the Great War and its aftermath, and in the 1930s.

Moreover, territorial identities are no longer regarded from an implicitly hierarchical perspective. The coexistence of multiple layers of loyalty, and the cohabitation of diverse spheres of territorial identification, from the local to the national, from the regional to the provincial, constituted a permanent feature of the process of nation building in all of Europe. Local identities were not always obliterated or deleted by emerging national patterns, but very often national identities were understood as a re-creation of local imaginations, as the well-known example of the evolution of the *Heimat* idea in German-speaking regions has suggested.\(^{15}\)

The view from the bottom up and the search for national experience, as an analytical category that tries to link up national narratives with individual perceptions and lived memories, was certainly reinforced by the increasing impact of the history of emotions upon the existing approaches to the history of nationalism and national identities. Nations are emotional communities by definition, and so are other forms of common belonging. Yet, a number of “high”, purportedly noble sentiments, such as loyalty, sacrifice, martyrdom and altruism, were supposed to be inherent and exclusive to national identity. Wars and conflicts contributed to solidify those emotional communities and make them endure. Yet they did so only where a common ground was created before. Although the expression of feelings is highly dependent on context and place, and varies across time, common patterns of nationalised emotions were discovered between different parts of Europe and the Americas. There were many ways in which, on the one hand, nationalism and national identity were translated into emotions, and, on the other hand, emotions can be used to reinforce national belonging. Moreover, as also demonstrated by research on regional identities, the borders between regional and national narratives are blurred and malleable, and not always subject to a
well-defined hierarchy of emotional priorities. The idea that many people are ready to
die for their nation, but not for their region, was not always self-evident. These two ideas
were intricately intertwined. For many Europeans the nation was a local passion, and
love for the terroir equaled patriotism.\textsuperscript{16}

Some recent approaches have also attempted to go deeper into the relationship
between the body and national emotions, by exploring how the body of the nation was
also internalised and translated in individual terms. And, finally, some authors have also
addressed the relationship between autobiographies, emotions, personal memory, and
national allegiance. As they all demonstrate, personal memory often was at odds with
the “margins” and borders of national identity, particularly in border regions, areas of
mixed ethnic settlement, or among persons displaced by changing boundaries.
Attention to internal migrations, forced displacements, imperial settlers returned home
after the independence of the colonies (from the Algerian \textit{pieds noirs} to the Portuguese
\textit{retornados}, but also the German \textit{Vertriebene} or the Karelian Finns who took shelter in
Central Finland after World War II), has also shed some new light on the inner complexity
and the continuous re-making of European identities. To reutilise some concepts used in
American migration studies since the 1960s, to describe the emergence of new national
identities in lands of immigration as melting pots or salad bowls, the internal complexity
of nationalism became even greater with the mass arrival of non-European immigrants
in the postwar period. Therefore, Europe became a salad bowl of multiple, intertwined
layers of identification that made national homogeneity virtually impossible.

\textbf{5. Europe as a continent of hybrid identities}

In conclusion, all this also meant that the methodologically enduring mental maps based
on the imagined demarcation between East and West, North and South, and their
different “models” of successful/unsuccessful nation-building had to be revisited.
Europe as a whole can be regarded as a mixed container of national narratives, national
allegiances and collective identities, whose complexity did not necessarily increase
beyond the Elbe river, south of the Pyrenees, or in the Transleithanian lands of the
Austro-Hungarian empire. Global interactions and exchanges also affected the many
ways in which individuals thought of their nations, and changes of boundaries were not
always as intrinsically relevant for people living in the Trentino, Silesian, Roussillon or
Karelian regions. Any narrative of Europe’s many national identities and narratives
should take account of their interactions and boundaries, but also of their deeply
entangled character.
Transfers of narratives, allegiances and identities entailed several social levels and dimensions of interaction. This implied intellectual exchanges and cultural appropriations between “centres” and “peripheries”, but also involved a flux of fruitful interactions between purported “peripheries”, between local communities and overseas migrants, and among internal migrants in Europe, from Italian seasonal labourers in Germany to Polish workers in Sweden. Thus, the outlook of Catalan nationalists was heavily influenced by Czech activists in the late 19th century, while Catalonia was regarded by Ukrainian historians in the first half of the 20th century as a possible pattern of comparison. The founder of the Irish nationalist party Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, drafted a political future for Ireland within the British empire after studying and interpreting Hungary’s role in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. He had also learned from the South African Boers how to imagine self-government for Ireland. National self-determination in World War I came as a result of the mixture of the Anglo-American concept of internal self-determination as the consent of the governed, and the principle of nationality, which was conveniently reframed by the French republican tradition and German Enlightenment ideas.

In the end, however paradoxical it may seem, the history of nation formation, and even of national conflict, in Europe, is a genuine entanglement of collective identities. Certainly, national narratives crafted by nationalising states and nationalist movements created enduring myths of exceptionalism and homogeneity and drew mental maps of Europe as a sum of states, boundaries, national stereotypes, and state languages. Yet, a fresh look at the origins and evolution of national identities in Europe uncovers a greater diversity, which highlights a changing landscape of links within and outside Europe. Nationalism has had a powerful ability to recycle and reinvest previous sentiments of belonging, either to the family or to the territory, the ethnic group or the local sphere, absorbing their forms of expression for a new purpose. But the distorted image created by nationalist narratives should not prevent historians from more deeply exploring these interactions and entanglements.

How to approach the history of national identities and nationalism in Europe in the third decade of the 21st century, when ethnic nationalism and the return of the nation-state seem to threaten the internal cohesion of the European Union, and the strengthening of boundaries is flanked by a new vigour of national narratives? Undoubtedly, the academic trends in nationalism studies follow the steps made by social sciences. Emphasis on the constructed and changing nature of national identities must be accompanied by a diversity of global and comparative perspectives, but also by the insistence on the view from below, making individuals the main focus of research. Seeing people as main protagonists of nation-building, as proactive actors who make choices within a framework of limited rationality. This also affects the way in which Europeans see their
links to the territory where they live, their past and their prospects for the future, as well as the traits they have in common with others. Constructivist approaches must not ignore the intrinsically hybrid nature of collective identities, as well as their multidirectional dimensions. In the end, a transnational history of nationalism in Europe (and elsewhere) has still to be written.

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10. Anne-Marie Thiesse, La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle, Paris 2011.[10]
11. For the origins of these narratives, see Stefan Berger, The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe, Basingstoke 2015. For an updated collection on the recent evolution of national histories in Europe, see Niels F. May / Thomas Maissen (eds.), National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: A Global Comparison, London 2021.[11]
12. For an updated view of recent developments and theories, see Stefan Berger / Erich Storm (eds.), Writing the History of Nationalism, London 2019.[12]
15. For a discussion of European cases of region-building, see Xosé M. Núñez Seixas / Eric Storm (eds.), Regionalism and Modern Europe: Identity Constructions and Movements from 1890 to the Present Day, London 2018.[15]