

National Construction and European Issues 18th-19th centuries

Frédéric FOGACCI

ABSTRACT

The idea of a tension between national and European ideas, today widespread in public opinion, is simply the result of long-term tensions which have left their mark on European history since the Middle Ages, from the rivalry between a papal Europe and a continental Europe in the medieval and early modern period to projects for a European balance of power in 1815 based on supranational empires opposed to national movements. The national idea itself was not always expressed in opposition to Europe, particularly in the nineteenth century; in fact, it has often directly or indirectly fed off this idea.



Rundgemälde von Europa im August MDCCCXLIX (1849). Panorama of Europe, august 1849. A caricature by Ferdinand Schröder on the defeat of the revolutions of 1848/49 in Europe (published in *Düsseldorfer Monatshefte*, August 1849.) Caricatures: Victoria (Queen of the United Kingdom), Frederick William IV (Emperor of Prussia), Christian VIII (King of Denmark) and Napoleon III (Emperor of France).

While, today, the idea of a tension between national sovereignty and European integration is widespread among Eurosceptic movements and in European public opinion, an excursion into European history since the early modern

period shows that, for a long time, the debate was set out in different terms. Several historiographical debates have contributed to the study of this question. The first involved questioning the premise that the national idea existed before the European idea. The debate on this subject between Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Denis de Rougement showed that in many respects a specifically European identity, if not a form of unity then at least a notion of cohesion founded on Christianity, predated the slow emergence of national consciousness, which was gradual and less easy to pin-point. The spread of a 'European model' beyond the frontiers of Europe (to Asia and later the Americas) thus arose during a period when the continent was dominated by supranational political entities (empires seeking to establish a European hegemony) or sub-national political units (the model of the Italian city state).

On the other hand, the very idea of Europe, from the early modern period until the nineteenth century, was often used by the powerful as an instrument of domination; Europe was established by force and not through the consent of its peoples, and the idea of Europe, therefore, was merely the illustration of this power relationship in the service of one power. It was ultimately only with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire that the national idea gradually transformed into a movement of nationalities, particularly as a reaction against the occupier but also by adopting some of its ideological baggage and its rejection of the supranational entities which triumphed at the Congress of Vienna (1815). Part of the history of Europe is therefore the history of a struggle between the desire for national unity and independence and the will of empires to impose, in the medium term and particularly through the Congress system, a balance of power which allowed the big nations to impose their designs on the small, as symbolised by the League of the Three Emperors signed in Vienna in October 1873.

The so-called period of "nationalities" was essential because it raised several questions linked to the spread of ideas and models across Europe. First, Europe became the theatre of competition between models of the state that can be summarised according to the typology of Eric Hobsbawm in *Nations and nationalities in Europe*, in which he draws a classic distinction between the French model (the nation as a state on a defined territory that recognises its authority) and the German model (the distinction between a political nation and a cultural nation), which fuelled national claims frustrated by the Vienna settlement in 1815. Several examples, such as that of Italy, show that these two models were integrated, but that the final national project can result from a (more or less complete) compromise between the two. Moreover, there is also the issue of the circulation of ideas: Hobsbawm identifies three phases in the spread of the national project, arguing that the spread of national sentiment in the population followed a three-fold pattern: the cultural and literary phase, the breakthrough into politics through groups of pioneers and militants, and finally the adherence of the masses to the so-called national programme. The establishment of the nation state was thus a gradual phenomenon, resulting at least as much from the evolution of public opinion as through the achievement of a political project, until it gradually came to embody "political modernity" in Europe in opposition to the multinational states inherited from the *Ancien Régime*.

The question of identities and national projects in a European framework thus raises several distinct lines of argument which provide the explanatory keys for understanding the crises of the 20th century: the question of the link between national projects and the balance of power in Europe, the question of the circulation of ideas and models (certain countries, like Revolutionary France being the bearers of a "European" project of the liberation of peoples as well as a national model) and, finally, the question of the link between national projects and "political modernity" in Europe, different forms of nation-building affecting the way different countries related to Europe.

Europe as a common identity and instrument of political domination in the Early Modern period

The first definitions of Europe, which date it back to Antiquity or to the Late Middle Ages, emphasise the common civilisation of all Europe, whether defined by Christianity, the Crusades, or by the three-fold inheritance set out by Paul Valéry in his 1922 lecture in Zurich: Europeans are those subject to the three-fold influence of Rome

(organised and stable power), Christianity and Greece. Conversely, most historians of the period see the national idea emerging with the Treaty of Verdun (843), which marked the break-up of the empire of Charlemagne. In the French case, a historiographical movement, set out by Colette Beaune and later Myriam Yardeni, defined a sense of community, emerging between the medieval and early modern eras, between the political nation and the "ethnic" community, based on loyalty to the king and Gallican Catholicism and on the use of the French language.

However, the medieval period and the start of the early modern period were marked above all by a desire to unify Europe through Christianity and then through continental empire, the failure of both of these favouring the emergence and consolidation of nations and its corollary, the necessary establishment of a European balance of power as a means of ensuring peace.

The first attempt to construct Christian Europe was undertaken by the Papacy, particularly from the moment of the first call to crusade of the Council of Clermont (1095), by trying to take advantage of the extreme fragmentation of political authority within the kingdoms. The Investiture Controversy in the mid 13th century shows the desire of the pontiffs to maintain exclusive power within the states: according to the formula of the Lateran Council (1139), Rome was 'at the head of the world' with its principal opponent in the Holy Roman Empire, particularly at the time of Frederick Barbarossa. This Christian project came up against certain limits, however: the impossibility of deciding between a theocratic project and papal Caesarism, the schism within Christianity reinforced by the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, as well as the gradual establishment of states that progressively weakened and restricted papal ambitions.

The Reformation of the fifteenth century further weakened papal authority, the question of religious pluralism, introduced into Christianity by the Lutheran and, subsequently, Calvinist Reformations, contributing to the affirmation of the states. The principle of *cujus regio, ejus religio*, which implies that the subjects of a prince share his religion, was both an instrument to control populations and a legitimization of power. The Anglican reformation of Henry VIII also reinforced this political dimension: by making the king the head of the national church, any possible counter-power or limit to Absolutism was eliminated. Therefore, the Reformation provided certain princes with an opportunity to distance themselves from the central power, particularly in the Holy Roman Empire, and to assert their independence, the political break and the religious break being closely linked. In Sweden, the proclamation of the Reformation at the beginning of the Vasa dynasty was at least as much a political act as a religious one: an effort to assert the power of the Kingdom of Sweden against Denmark and to distance royal power from the political role of the church. Religious pluralism in fact remained rare, except in the United Provinces, in Sweden (where Lutheranism did not become obligatory for subjects of the king until 1686) and in France where the Edict of Nantes in 1598 made religious tolerance a means of political appeasement, even if the policy of Richelieu forcibly imposed the Catholic dimension of royal power by refuting any Protestant "state within a state."

The second attempt to unite Europe beyond national projects was to be found in the ambition to establish a continental empire in Europe. This ambition, symbolised by the resistance of the emperors to papal initiatives during the medieval period, took a new turn with the arrival of Charles V in 1516: the Austrian, Burgundian and Spanish (with the American empire in the making) inheritances made this ambition possible: potential rivals like France found themselves encircled. French resistance, including its rapprochement with the Protestant Schmalkaldic League (1531) showed that the Gallican principle, relatively compatible with the vision of Reformation, was finally instrumentalised to constitute a counter-alliance against the imperial project. As Fernand Braudel argued, the failure of Charles V and the division of his lands at the time of his abdication in 1555 (Spain and the Low Countries went to his son Philip, the Empire to his brother Ferdinand) brought an end to a period that favoured large territorial units in Europe, the need to construct a European balance of power giving a role to the small nations. The involvement of a country like Sweden in the Thirty Years War gave it the opportunity to play the role of arbiter in the European power balance.

The Westphalian Europe of the eighteenth century and the development of a form of European cosmopolitanism were accompanied, however, by fundamental changes that redefined national sentiment. First of all, there was an intellectual and cultural movement: as Jean-Baptiste Duroselle emphasises, the “French Europe” of the Enlightenment led in turn to hostile national reactions in states that had already been established (England, the United Provinces, Spain) or aspired to be (Italy). But the eighteenth century was also the century of the development of the national principle: the flagellation speech of Louis XV to the Parlement of Paris (1766), by refusing the possibility of distinguishing the nation from the person of the king, indirectly underlined that this movement was underway.

The problematic influence of the French Revolution on the nation-building process

The French Revolution and Empire did not create a Europe of nationalities. The various European projects of Napoleon (following Jean-Baptiste Duroselle’s typology: the Europe of the Peace of Amiens, the Europe of royal families and the Europe of the continental system) were all rejected by the populations of Europe, and when the Congress of Vienna restored the rights of the sovereigns, the national will did not feature at all in the definition of the principle of sovereignty. Beyond France, Portugal and Spain, few nations coincided with a sovereign state: the authority of the Kingdom of England was challenged throughout the nineteenth century by Irish separatists. In contrast to this stood the model of supranational Empires (Austria, Russia, Ottoman Empire) as well as the nations fragmented between different political authorities (Italy and Germany; linguistically and culturally German populations lived under Russian, Austrian, Danish rule as well as in the German Confederation of 39 states controlled, *de facto*, by Austria) and some semi-national models. Finland, to which the Russian Empire granted a relatively large degree of autonomy throughout the nineteenth century, the Tsar having found at the Diet of Porvoo (1809) the existence of an efficient administrative system that he would reform little, or more originally, Norway which was ceded by Denmark to Sweden in 1814: a revolt resulted, from which was born the liberal constitution which coexisted with the constitution of Swedish rulers until independence in 1905.

The link between the French Revolution and Empire and the development of the national idea has been the subject of extensive debate, symbolised by Jürgen Habermas’s formulation: “the nation state and democracy are twins born out of the French Revolution. From a cultural point of view, both have been growing in the shadow of nationalism.” Indeed, the classic historiography of the revolution puts the spread of the republican model and, more broadly, the contestation of the values of the Ancien Régime at the heart of the acceleration of the struggle for national sentiment in Europe: in fact, it was from the French Revolution that emerged the idea of the sovereignty of the state emanating from the nation, making the nation a political community before being a cultural, geographical or religious community. Here one finds the source of the idea that would lead Ernest Renan to define the nation as a “daily plebiscite.” But national traditions also appeared in the struggle against French occupation, as the example of Spain demonstrates: it was during the War of Independence that the Cadiz Constitution (1812) was written, aiming to reconstruct Spain on a liberal model. Similarly, the Swedish constitution of 1809 would remain in effect until 1975, subject to certain adjustments! After Vienna, it was in the name of this constitution that liberal opposition would rise up against the king, Ferdinand VII, leading to French intervention in Spain in 1822-1824. More broadly, the ideological inheritance of the French Revolution gave the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the appearance of a “regaining of control” by multinational empires, even if nationalists, like Mazzini, were hardly supporters of “small states” that were not very viable: on his map of Europe in 1857, Mazzini only proposed 12 nations in Europe.

Can nation-building, political modernity and democracy be linked?

The history of national movements in the nineteenth century has led to several fundamental historiographical debates, which call into question the process of nation-state formation.

First, while national movements emerged in waves, the reciprocal influences between them are hard to determine. The “moment” of 1830 is such an example: Greek independence, achieved through the Treaty of Adrianople and the London Conference (February 1830), followed by the July Revolution in Paris (July 1830), triggered a European movement, notably in Belgium and Poland. However, these movements are hardly comparable in their meaning and in their aims: the Greek independence movement rested on a strong cultural and religious basis, while its political dimensions caused many divisions, a “military” branch rejecting all French influence. The support of France, Britain and Russia for this national movement proved full of ulterior motivations, while Metternich was opposed to it as a challenge to the Holy Alliance. Neither was there any solidarity between the various movements: the government of Casimir Perier refused in 1831 to provide the slightest support to the Polish uprising allowing, in the famous phrase of Ambassador Sebastiani, “order to reign in Warsaw.”

Similarly, the “springtime of the peoples” in 1848 can be interpreted less as a Europe-wide movement than as a set of simultaneous events which lacked a common aim but, paradoxically, fed off each other. The French uprising in February, leading to the proclamation of the Second Republic, fuelled the revolutionary wave in Europe in that it served as a trigger, representing a decisive breach in the order of the Congress of Vienna, a breach into which an international group of outlaws and republican exiles such as Mazzini would step. However, the republican model and the revolutionary principle of the right of peoples as a corollary to sovereignty did not spread beyond France. Thus, the Frankfurt Parliament soon abandoned the republican plan and instead turned to the Prussian king, Frederick-William IV, offering him the crown in order to “guarantee” German independence. In sum, the question of the circulation of ideas and models in the uprisings of 1848 remains problematic: in many cases, the revolutionary context favoured the reawakening of local particularisms that had previously been stifled. Such was the case in Venice where Daniele Manin and the leaders of the Venetian insurrection did not for one second envisage the integration of the city of the doges into a European or even Italian movement, but sought instead the restoration of its ancient traditions and independence.

Following on from this, a second historiographical debate has questioned whether the national idea can be fully assimilated into the democratic model. The revolution of 1830 led to the establishment of a monarchy in Belgium, just as the movements of 1848 mainly led the advocates of the national idea to favour conservative solutions. The idea of a link between national effort and republican sentiment was therefore fundamentally a minority view: only the Roman movement of 1848-1849 came close to it, Mazzini envisaging a revolutionary contagion in Europe as a condition to guarantee the Italian Republic, but in vain: it was the Piedmontese monarchical project led by Cavour and Victor Emmanuel II which led to the unification of Italy.

Indeed, the very notion of national unity comes up against the dual definition of the nation, theorised in the famous controversy between Fustel de Coulanges and Mommsen and later taken up again by Renan: is the nation the product of the free association of citizens in a common political community, making the nation the famous “daily plebiscite?” This is the Mazzinian concept, which implies that nationality and the state must necessarily coincide. It was around this concept that the Young Europe movement of Giuseppe Mazzini was constructed, which wanted to put forward this Europe of nationalities in opposition to the Holy Alliance of Metternich. Conversely, the German concept defined the nation through common submission to a legitimate sovereign and as a coherent cultural and ethnic unit, the *Volk*. As such, Napoleon III’s feigned support for the defence of the principle of nationality aimed, from the point of view of Bismarck and to a lesser extent Cavour, to establish a sovereign and closed state. Nation-building thus overrode any European dimension: while in 1852 the Prussians invoked the principle of nationality to support the rising of the Danish duchies, particularly Schleswig (which became Prussian following the war of 1864), in 1853 Bismarck flatly refused the inclusion of Austria in the *Zollverein* (customs union) which had the sole aim of promoting German unity. Rather, the idea that there was not room for two in Germany led to the construction of the nation *ferro et igni*, through *Eisen und Blut*. The European dimension of the Bismarckian project emerged later when, through the Europe of the peace conferences of the 1870s, a system of alliances maintained a European balance of power that, by depriving France of the possibility of alliances, prevented it from any war of revenge.

Lastly, there is the issue of “political modernity,” which can take several forms, as defined by the Norwegian political scientist Stein Rokkan: a western European model (where the commercial, capitalist bourgeoisie, integrated into European currents and sensitive to the circulation of ideas, played an important role and cities had a fundamental importance as a site for constituting civil society), an eastern European model (militarised and hierarchized states, feudal agricultural structures, the role of a conservative nobility) and a Scandinavian model which could have the appearance of a third way, a property-owning peasantry playing a role in the gradual spread of democracy, but with the persistence in Sweden of an aristocracy that played a fundamental role in the establishment of the modern state.

European turmoil also played its part: in Denmark the uprising in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, while repressed militarily by the crown, fed into an internal demand for liberalisation, which resulted in the adoption of the constitution of 1849 including the responsibility of ministers before parliament and the enlargement of the electorate to all men of independent means under 30 years.

Nation-building and challenges to the European balance of power

The formation of the Italian and German nation states in the early 1870s paradoxically inaugurated an era of power balance while also raising tensions in Europe, although national rivalries were transferred for a time into the field of colonial conquest. The new era was thus paradoxically very unfavourable to the emergence of national movements, the Congress of Berlin on the Balkan crisis in 1878 demonstrating just how much Germany, previously the champion of nation causes, intended to neutralise the latter in the name of maintaining the European balance of power. Indeed, the conference aimed to limit the effects of the Russian victory in order to maintain the existence of the Ottoman Empire, despite its decline, and above all to contain the discontent of Britain and Austria-Hungary over the encroachment of Russia into the Dardanelles and central Europe. The division of the Balkan peninsula into small states aimed to make these states dependent on more powerful allies and even to nip certain national ambitions in the bud, including Bulgarian nationalism (more than half of the territory defined in the San Stefano treaty remaining subject to direct or indirect Ottoman rule) showing how the diplomacy of the Concert of Europe constrained national claims within a rather restrictive concept of the balance of power. One can thus argue that, in the period before the First World War, national movements were stifled beneath power rivalries in Europe, with changes only really taking place at the edges of Europe: Norway gained its independence from Sweden in 1905, while the First World War brought about Finnish independence in 1917. However, these national movements and the on-going crisis of the Ottoman Empire played a fundamental role in the origins of the conflict since the Balkan crises challenged Bismarck’s project of Balkanisation. Serbia’s power ambitions fuelled the rise of tensions between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires; the two Balkan wars could be considered a rehearsal for the coming global conflict.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BUSSIÈRE, Eric, DUMOULIN, Michel, TRAUSCH, Gilbert (dir.), *Europa. L’idée et l’identité européenne, de l’Antiquité au début du ^{xx}^e siècle*, Bruxelles, Fonds Mercator, 2001.

COULOUBARITSIS, Lambros, *Aux sources de l’idée européenne*, Bruxelles, Presses interuniversitaires européennes, 1993.

DESBAZEILLES, Michèle, *L’Europe, naissance d’une utopie*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996.

DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste, *L’Europe, histoire de ses peuples*, Paris, Hachette, 1998.

HABERMAS, Jurgen, « Citoyenneté et identité nationale. Réflexions sur l’avenir de l’Europe », dans Jacques Lenoble

et Nicole Dewandre, *L'Europe au soir du siècle, identité et démocratie*, Paris, Esprit, 1992.

Hobsbawm, Eric, *Nations et nationalismes depuis 1780*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

POMIAN, Kryztof, *L'Europe et ses nations*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/political-europe/national-construction-and-european-issues/national-construction-and-european-issues>