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Nation

By Wolfgang Kaschuba

Translated by Ashwin J. Manthripragada

Since the fifteenth century the Latin term *natio* has gradually seeped into European languages as a loanword. This illustrates the conceptualization of a populace bound by lineage, history, language and culture, which, as “a people and a nation,” projects an image of itself as an historical community, and finds confirmation of this image (because everyone does it!) even in foreign images produced by others. Poeticizations and historicizations like religions and wars gradually “nationalize” people’s memory and upbringing, their knowledge and outlook on life. Increasingly, the political order and constitution of a modern society is also characterized by this process of nationalization, which takes on the sovereign form of the nation state through the state’s territory and constitution, through institutions and cultural norms, through values and citizen rights.¹

Today, however, all of this seems contentious, for the views concerning the question of *nation* could not stand in greater opposition than they do now: on the one hand, the deepest certitude that the nation simultaneously embodies the mental and emotional basis of social existence and cultural development, that the nation alone sufficiently bestows stability and security to individuals for their personal and social liberties as well as for their plans for and attitude towards life; on the other hand, the deeply skeptical idea that *nation* denotes an ideological construct, an “imaginary political community,” which defines itself up through the present in “historical, fateful terms” and performs as an essentialist cultural unity.² This ambivalence shapes not just recent German history and its present; it is much more a global phenomenon: today children are still being born (or births are forbidden) in the name of the nation; wars are initiated and ended in the name of the nation; or a nation’s flag continues to be co-opted for comic purposes or for bedcover décor. *Nation* continues to be a contentious term that is as venerated as it is contested, as satirized as it is misused.

Seen historically and ideologically, *nation* thereby embodies the systematic counter-concept to *migration*. It invariably places the image of a permanently migratory movement across open spaces, societies and times in opposition to the normative idea of spatial containment, social enclosure and cultural delimitation. Thinking *nationally* invariably originated in the distinction of *self* from *non-self*, in the permanent and insoluble oppositional forces of *us* and *them*. Such thinking followed an ethno-national paradigm³ that regarded the nation, above all, as a closed ancestral society, which either compelled the internal/external Other to conform and assimilate or to remain at a distance as something *foreign*.

¹ See Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), 141–431.

² Benedict Anderson, *Die Erfindung der Nation: zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1996), 150.

³ See Wolfgang Kaschuba, “Deutsche Wir-Bilder nach 1945: Ethnischer Patriotismus als kollektives Gedächtnis?“, in *Selbstbilder und Fremdbilder. Repräsentation sozialer Ordnungen im Wandel*, ed. Jörg Baberowski, Hartmut Kaelble and Jürgen Schriewer, 295–330 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008).

The impact of this paradigm on German history is especially salient. Here, the comparatively late formation of a European nation-state (1871) led to the idea of a Germanic-Teutonic ancestral and cultural community that had gained ground up to that point—as a particular historical emblem of “German nature.” On the one hand, distinguishing Germany from late-absolutist Napoleonic France was used, above all, to conceptualize a clear adversary, against which a German identity could be formulated through difference: *us* vs. *them* became a matter of threat. On the other hand and concurrently, a polemic was invariably mobilized against the alleged “foreigner” within: against fellow Jewish citizens in the early nineteenth century, against Polish immigrants in the early twentieth. In this manner, the conceptualization of “national integration” developed in completely different ways than, for instance, in the US. Since this “nation of immigrants” could not build upon communities of ancestry and culture, the US attempted to create national ties through patriotism for its constitution and its citizenry.

For a long time in the German mindset, *nation* signified a fateful chain of false ideologizations, homogenizations, and essentializations of one’s own culture. And these ideas, following the 1933 race politics of the National Socialists, found their most dramatic and just as brutal expression in the persecution of minorities and in the millionfold extermination of Jewish lives in the Holocaust. Even after 1945, opposition to immigration itself as well as to the characterization of Germany as an “immigrant society” clearly demonstrate how deeply inscribed such “ethnic thinking” is in the minds of the post-war generation. And this despite the immediate post-war movements of over 15 million Holocaust survivors, forced laborers, refugees and displaced peoples—the so-called “foreigners”—within and to Germany. And this despite the fact that since the “Migrant Worker Agreements” of the 60s, more and more people—primarily from Turkey, Italy, Spain, or the former Yugoslavia—have been immigrating as laborers and inhabiting the often newly abandoned hostels and Nissen huts of “German” refugee families. Only after 1989, given explicit deliberations on new self-conceptions of a German “immigrant society,” does this perspective, spiritually and culturally xenophobic at its core, seem to weaken and open up. However, at the same time and in opposition to this change, the avowal of “nationalism” in a bourgeois middle-class milieu has become fashionable once again as an argument against migration—from Germany to Switzerland, Denmark to Hungary. Consequently, neo-nationalist debates as well as right-wing populist movements in European countries also ultimately offer significant ideological support to Neo-Nazi and racist stances on a pure “white” (or “brown” for that matter) Europe.

Thus, the agenda of “national integration” appears today as a thoroughly problematic concept. When the prospect of economic, social, political, and above all cultural participation is no longer dependent upon biological or cultural ancestral verification, but is framed as open and implemented in local, regional, national or even religious communities of wholly different persuasions, then the “law of diversity” must rule. Then, all possible forms of ethnic and national “otherness,” as well as intercultural and transnational orientation, must also be conceivable and viable. Then, the concept of *nation and integration* must be thought through in much more procedural terms; social intermixtures and cultural hybridizations must become so self-evident to us, that the rhetoric of “Germans-by-blood and foreign bloodsuckers” only turns up as a bitter satire on this kind of already outdated bar talk.

“Globalization” also brings about the following: national identities, societal guarantees and cultural affiliations become weaker and less unequivocal, even if right-wing populist chants attempt to drown out this growing consciousness. Instead,

fleeting affiliations and individual categorizations grow in number: temporary grass-roots organizing, rather than permanent party-membership; national soccer fans with “migrant” backgrounds, rather than rabble-rousers who are “German-by-blood;” listening to Adele, rather than singing the national anthem! Everything national must at long last “pluralize.” If the concept of *national* intends on remaining legitimate and purposeful, especially in Germany, it must uncouple itself from fundamentalist political, ethnic or religious arguments; it must finally strike from its vocabulary the stale Nazi creed that “One does not become German, one is German!”