

# Reloading the Minority Nations after 1945: Some Transnational Suggestions\*

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The articles contained in this issue constitute a selection of the papers presented at the *Reloading the Nation? Alternative concepts of sovereignty and citizenship in national movements (1960-2014)* workshop, which was held in Brussels by NISE and the Centre Maurits Coppieters on 3-4 December 2015. Five years later, the reflections contained in these contributions do not appear to be outdated. Events since then, in particular the evolution of the Catalan secessionist challenge and the new impulse that Brexit seems to give to the possibility of holding a second referendum for independence in Scotland, continue to stress the utmost relevance of sub-state nationalism in present-day European politics.

## I.

It seems that the second decade of the twentieth-first century will mark a turning-point in the (relatively short) history of substate nationalist movements in Western Europe. The issue of inner enlargement of the European Union and the possible emergence of new states in that area cannot be excluded from the present-day political agenda at the international level.<sup>1</sup> This also creates the possibility for a substantial

reloading of the concept of nation, as well as a further exploration of its limits and possibilities.

The focus in this text will not be on present-day political developments, but rather on the comparative evolution of minority nationalisms in Western Europe after the Second World War. At that time, particularly since the 1960s, a first process of ‘reloading’ of the cultural and ideological contents ascribed to the nation, and also to some extent to the concept of ‘nationalism’ (or, if one prefers, ‘minority nation’), took place among several minority nationalist elites and parties. This was their response to the several challenges they were confronted with.<sup>2</sup>

First, for many of these substate nationalist elites it was mandatory to overcome the enduring shadow of Fascism, collaboration with foreign occupiers and/or ideological proximity to the Axis powers. This became especially acute in Flanders, Alsace, Brittany or Frisia, but a similar dilemma also affected other movements, such as the South Tyroleans, or even the purported ‘indifference’ towards the antifascist war effort that Welsh and Scottish nationalists were blamed for. This heavy burden led some minority nationalists through the 1950s and 1960s to reinvent themselves, which usually meant looking for convenient external models and searching in their past for appropriate antecedents. Thus, the Bretons forgot about the *Parti National Breton* and the pro-Fascist bretonnant groups of the 1930s and focused instead on the federalist and ‘europeanist’ tendencies that were also attached to the movement in the 1920s.

Second, this had to be performed in accordance with the new legitimacy that was acquired by most old-established nation-states that had survived as winners after the Second World War. In most of them, their national identity was reinvented on the basis of the invention of an ‘antifascist consensus’: the true nationalist shared a joint opposition towards fascism in the past and in the present. This did not affect anti-

fascist Sardinian autonomists, as well as exiled and/or clandestine Basque, Catalan, and Galician nationalists, who were the main driving forces of anti-fascist opposition in their respective territories. Therefore, the incorporation of ethnonationalist demands from the periphery was even regarded by anti-fascist projects of reshaping the Spanish political and/or national community as a crucial part of the project. However, this was not the case with Italian, French, or Belgian antifascist patriots until the 1970s.

Third, the necessity to adapt themselves to the process of European integration, and to transform their claims into a more nuanced defence of the new role that 'ethnic communities', 'regions', and substate entities would have to play in a unified Europe. This paved the way for tempering claims for self-determination and/or statehood (which nevertheless continued to be present, although at a less visible level, in almost all movements), by prioritizing claims for regional home-rule, regional devolution, federalism, and any form of territorial self-government. At the same time, most ethnonationalist elites embraced the new objective of attaining a unified Europe based not so much upon nation-states, but on 'nationalities', ethnic communities, 'regions', etc. Models and utopian projects that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s varied from a Europe of 'free peoples' to a further regionalization of the EEC member states within the context of a Europe of regions, where nonetheless 'administrative' regions and stateless nations would have to coexist on an equal footing. This wave affected 'ethnic movements' and minority nationalisms in different ways.<sup>3</sup>

Was this a 'reloading' of the nation, or just a strategic adaptation that sought to find a place under the sun for movements which, in the context of the Cold War, had a difficult insertion in the 'mental map' and the political agenda of European elites? What did the different projects of a new Europe based on simultaneous regional devolution and European devolution have in common? While the end of the nation-state was

constantly heralded by political scientists and international observers through the 1970s and 1980s, there seemed to be little place left for new nation-states within Western Europe. However, some political tendencies within established national movements continued to strive for this and did not give up the ultimate objective of setting up an independent nation-state. Moreover, some others considered that statehood for their own nations would come after a long process that, among other elements, would entail a complete renewal and/or reshaping of the concept of nation-state itself.

A fourth element came from the colonial peripheries of European empires: the impact on European minority nationalisms of the doctrines and strategies adopted by national liberation movements in Africa, Asia and, to some extent, Latin America (from the Cuban '26 of July movement' to the Uruguayan *Tupamaros*). This has to be settled within a *longue-durée* perspective, as colonial elites had also previously learnt some lessons from European national movements in the interwar period, and connections between 'imperial' nationalisms of the British periphery (Boers, Australians, etc.) and peripheral nationalisms of the metropolitan core had already taken place since the end of the nineteenth century. However, since the early 1950s the example of the third-world anticolonialist movements, from Indonesia and Algeria to Mozambique, gave a new generation of minority nationalists in Western Europe the chance of overcoming the burden inherited of their predecessors (the suspicion of Fascist or *völkisch* leaning), as well as the opportunity to supposedly overcome the dilemma between class and nation. This combined with the reception of the theories of Frantz Fanon, which dealt with the cultural and psychosomatic 'alienation' of colonised peoples by the colonisers. The parallel contributions by Albert Memmi (1966) and G. Balandier (1963) also emphasized the sociopsychological consequences of colonial rule on colonised peoples.<sup>4</sup>

This stimulus was also taken up by some Occitanian and Breton nationalists in France. In 1962, Robert Lafont coined the concept of 'internal colonialism'. According to him, there were also 'colonies' in Western Europe, and similar solutions and strategies to those adopted by the national liberation movements could be adapted to the specific circumstances of 'internal peripheries' like Occitany, Brittany, Wales, Corsica, and Galicia, among other territories.

This new theoretical framework experienced a particularly successful diffusion among southern European minority nationalist movements. Nevertheless, the modalities of its adaptation and appropriation, as in every process of cultural transfer, diverged from one case to another. This also permitted a new generation of ethnonationalist activists to find a formula to make compatible ethnonationalism with Marxism and even Marxism-Leninism, going beyond the writings of Lenin and Stalin on the national question. According to the new paradigm of the 1960s, as expressed e.g. by the *Charte de Brest* (1974), there were 'proletarian' regions/nations by reason of the nature of their political and economic link to the nation-state they belonged to. Therefore, the fight for national liberation became just a complementary front to the internationalist struggle for achieving socialism, also fuelled by new ingredients such as the New Left after May 68, feminism, and the ecology.

Nevertheless, here the question emerges of the limits of cultural transfer and internationalism: in the end, what actually took place in most examples was a convenient reinterpretation, in the light of the new 'thirdworldist' and revolutionary theories, of their own tradition of nationalist thinking, just picking up those elements which were considered most suitable to be taken up from a left-wing outlook, from the *Bleun Brug* in Brittany to the *Félibrige rouge* in Occitania. The doubt remains: What was more important? The Basque, Corsican, Sardinian, Breton, Welsh, Galician nationalist tradition? Or just the new 'nationalist

internationalism of the left' that found some expression in documents such as the *Charte de Brest*?

A fifth element was the endogenous evolution of northern-European minority nationalist movements. The 'thirdworldist' wave had little impact on them, while a stronger continuity with their interwar tradition may be noted, and some other non-European influences, notably the powerful ideological influence of the *Québécois* movement since the 1980s, took the lead. This was the case with *Plaid Cymru*, the Scottish National Party, *Volksunie*, or even the classic 'ethnic' parties of Germanophones in South Tyrol (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*) and the Swedish-speaking Finns (SFP). The legacy of their prewar forerunners was now reinterpreted from a more liberal and mostly social-democratic perspective, while their traditional claims for self-government were also reframed in accordance with the international context. They also claimed the existence of economic grievances that affected their homelands, and blamed the states they belonged to for 'plundering', not for colonizing, their resources. This was also the case with some Southern-European minority nationalist parties, such as the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) or (with some nuances) the Sardinian Party of Action (PSd'A). Some of them also had to compete with the different social-democratic nationalist parties that emerged in some Western-European stateless nations, from the Northern Irish SDLP to the Catalan PSC, the Galician PSG, and many others. There was a dialogue between, on the one hand, the territorial sections of the statewide socialist and social-democratic parties in Scotland, Wales, Catalonia and other territories and, on the other hand, traditional ethnonationalist parties and tenets. This also had a further consequence: through the end of the twentieth century, many of these parties continued to be regarded as the best upholders of territorial interests of those stateless nations (Labour in Scotland, Socialists in Catalonia, etc.), as some Communist parties also did in other peripheries.

All these elements may have contributed to ‘reload’ the concepts of nation and to make it more civic and less ethnic, although the concrete impact on each particular European minority nation, region or territory produced very different results: from fostering violence in some cases,<sup>5</sup> to undermining the element ‘nation’ in favour of ‘class’ in other territories.

## II.

Within this general framework, many issues may be raised, which will be certainly addressed too by other contributions in this special issue. They can be summarized as followed:

(a) Did minority nationalisms in Western Europe definitively overcome the most ‘ethnocentric’ aspects of their political discourse, under the influence of the Cold War, the process of European unification, the need to adapt to the prevailing antifascist and democratic consensus around the maintenance of the welfare state, and, last but not least, the undeniable fact that miscegenation, plurality of identities and the increasing weight of non-European immigration has profoundly changed the structure of most European societies?

(b) What was more important: the endogenous evolution of each nationalist movement, drawing upon its own politico-ideological tradition and the specific conditions of the political and/or party system where it developed, or the transnational dimension of minority nationalism, the diffusion of principles and ‘waves’ throughout entire areas of Europe? Otherwise expressed: to what extent is it possible to maintain that the history of nationalist movements in the postwar period was an increasingly entangled one, or was it just as entangled as it had been before – *rien de plus international que le nationalisme?*

(c) Was first the blurring and then the almost definitive failure of the project of a 'regionalized' model of European integration a decisive push for the re-emergence and/or the re-strengthening of independence claims within Western European minority nationalisms?<sup>6</sup>

(d) To what extent did the image of what was going on in Eastern Europe after 1989 decisively influence (or not) strategic changes in the political agenda of Western European nationalist movements? To put it simply, during the 1990s the western minority nationalisms' outlook on Eastern-European paths to independence was first marked by fascination, later by the steady distancing from what was regarded as the worst side of nationalism. Yet, since the 2004 Eastern enlargement of the European Union, a new perspective seems to have been developed: if they managed to do it, and have made compatible the existence of national minorities within their territories with their 'national resurgence', why not us? This certainly poses again an old question: the pertinence of maintaining the supposedly existing divide between 'eastern' (i.e. ethnic) and 'western' (i.e. civic) nationalism.

(e) Minority nationalisms have also experienced, even in the most successful cases, the limits of identity politics. They were increasingly forced to include in their agenda attractive offers for non-nationalist voters (or, at least, for citizens who were not particularly sensitive to identity issues, but who saw in nationalist parties appropriate defenders of their interests), which also included a growing proportion of immigrants from other regions or from outside Europe. This was mostly regarded by nationalist elites as a pragmatic strategy of step-by-step nation building, but at the same time this also obliged them to postpone the achievement of the ultimate goals (self-government, independence, sovereignty...), and posed the dilemma of how to convince non-nationalists to endorse nationalist agendas, by using new labels and slogans ('national' and not 'nationalist' parties, 'sovereignty-ism', etc.) that reinforced the inclusive character of the proposed national projects.

This strategy was culminated with success in some cases, in some others it has led to a lasting 'crisis of identity' of ethnonationalist parties, which perceive that a great proportion of their voters do not share the bulk of their national agendas.

National identity is supposed to be (in theory) monogamous. One may have different layers of collective identity, love his/her region, his/her ethnic origins, and his/her village or city. But he or she espouses just one nation. Yet, minority nationalisms could not, and can not, escape the internal tension of making their national(ist) tenets compatible with tolerance for individuals' double/multiple identities. In the end, abandoning the emotive cohesion and the passionate appeal to the nation in classic terms ('us' against 'them', the identification with endangered culture and language, etc.) in favour of socioeconomic claims ('colonial' exploitation, or economic grievance – 'we pay for them, it's our oil, the state steals from us', etc.) leads to a further dilemma: being accused of just pursuing self-interest. Is it possible to be Garibaldi and Bossi at the same time? Is it possible to present the aim at building new nation-states as a new opportunity for creating a better society, while at the same time denying other parts of the same state the possibility to benefit from it?<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, the answers to that question have varied from one case to another, and the arguments that emphasise economic grievance, cultural oppression, proactive prospects for creating a better society and alternative models of welfare and social justice are intertwined in a more complex manner. And what matters – or what interests us as social scientists – is how people perceive these frames of meaning and politically act in accordance with them, independently of how performative the arguments of territorial grievance or cultural oppression may have been.

(f) Finally, to what extent have minority nationalisms decisively reshaped the theory of the nation and crafted new concepts of national identity?<sup>8</sup> Given the fact that Western European nationalist movements since 1945 have not yet attained statehood, most of their elites may argue that they are not responsible for enforced cultural assimilation and violence in the past, as most ‘majority’ nationalisms of the established nation-states have done in the long nineteenth century and even during the twentieth century. Minority nationalism usually presents itself as a reaction to decades or centuries of enforced assimilation policies that were set up by existing states and/or ruling majorities. For this reason, a precondition for success for minority nationalisms that develop in consolidated democracies and advanced capitalist societies, and which aim at reversing centuries of nation-building processes implemented by nation-states, seems to be that they have been forced to reinvent the concept of nation and to reload it with ‘post-national’ contents. These contents enhance respect for democracy, human rights, social justice, tolerance, and universal values. This may prevent them from becoming, as it has happened in many areas, a new ‘oppressor’, such as the ‘nationalizing states’ (Brubaker) of the interwar period in East-Central Europe did, once statehood has been achieved.

## Endnotes

\*The present text is based on the position paper held as introduction to the workshop *Reloading the Nation?*, Brussels, 3-4 December 2015.

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, F. Requejo & K-J. Nagel, *Democracy and Borders: External and Internal Secession in the EIU* (Euroborders Working Paper 14, September 2017); C. Closa (ed.), *Secession from a Member State and Withdrawal from the European Union: Troubled Membership* (Cambridge, 2017); X. Cuadras-Morató (ed.), *Catalonia: A New Independent State in Europe? A Debate on Secession within the European Union* (London/New York, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See J. W. Friend, *Stateless Nations. Western European Regional Nationalisms and the Old Nations* (New York, 2012); A. Gat, *Nations. The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 2013); X. M. Núñez Seixas, *Patriotas transnacionales. Ensayos sobre nacionalismos y transferencias culturales en la Europa del siglo XX* (Madrid, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See for an interpretation X. M. Núñez Seixas, 'Il ritorno dello stato-nazione? Alcune ipotesi sulle spinte indipendentiste nell'Europa occidentale all'inizio del XXI secolo', in: *Passato e Presente*, 105 (2018), 5-18.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Kernalegenn, J. Belliveau & J-O. Roy (eds), *La vague nationale des années 1968. Une comparaison internationale* (Ottawa, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> L. de la Calle, *Nationalist Violence in Postwar Europe* (Cambridge, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> A. Elias, *Minority Nationalist Parties and European Integration: A Comparative Study* (London, 2009); Ch. Harvie, *The Rise of Regional Europe* (London/New York, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See E. dalle Mulle, *The Nationalism of the Rich. Discourses and Strategies of Separatist Parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland* (London, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See J. Lluch, *Visions of Sovereignty. Nationalism and Accommodation in Multinational Democracies* (Philadelphia, 2014).