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# The invention of Germany in the nineteenth century: Kleist and Fichte as propagators

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During the French Revolution and the ensuing wars both France and Germany developed an entirely new concept of the nation. In Germany Heinrich von Kleist and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, among others, were imagining "Germany" in a territory which had no such national unity. Similar processes take place wherever feudal or traditional societies are reinventing themselves as nation states. Nation is the imaginary construct of a bounded community (state) whose inner and outer boundaries simultaneously include and exclude. While the concept of an "imagined" community addresses some of the aspects of nationalism, this "imagination" does not come about by itself, but has to be "invented" and the citizens of this community have to be indoctrinated by "education" and propaganda.

## Die Erfindung Deutschlands im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Kleist und Fichte als Propagandisten

Während der Französischen Revolution und den Kriegen danach, entwickelten Frankreich und Deutschland ein völlig neues Konzept der Nation. In Deutschland war es Heinrich von Kleist und Johann Gottlieb Fichte, die sich "Deutschland" in einem Territorium vorstellten, in dem es eine solche nationale Einheit nicht gab. Ähnliche Prozesse laufen dort ab, wo immer feudale oder traditionelle Gesellschaften sich als Nationalstaaten neu erfinden. Nation ist ein imaginäres Konstrukt einer begrenzten Gemeinschaft (Staat), deren innere und äußere Grenzen zur selben Zeit ein- und ausschließen. Während der Begriff der "imaginierten" Gemeinschaft einige Aspekte des Nationalismus anspricht, so kommt aber die "Imagination" nicht von selbst, sondern muss "erfunden" werden und die Bürger dieser Gemeinschaft müssen durch "Erziehung" und Propaganda indoktriniert werden.

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In his *Catechism of the Germans* Kleist lets the father ask his son: “Child, who are you?” and the son answers (or: is supposed to answer): “I am a German”, whereupon the father mocks him and says: “A German? You are joking. You have been born in Meißen and the country to which Meißen belongs, is called Saxony.” When the son insists: yes, that is correct, “but my fatherland, of which Saxony is a part, is Germany, and your son, my father, is a German”; the father says: “You are dreaming. I do not know any country of which Saxony is a part [...] Where do I find it, this Germany, of which you speak, and where is it?” (Kleist 1978a: 389) The Germany, Kleist refers to, can neither be the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which had been dissolved by Napoleon in 1805 after the Peace of Preßburg, nor the (second) German Reich of 1871, the Weimar Republic of 1919, The Third Reich of 1933, the Bundesrepublik of 1947 or the re-unified Germany of 1990. At the time he was writing the *Catechism* (1809) there was no German nation-state, and there would not be one for at least another 60 years. When the father asks: “And nevertheless it is still in existence?” The son has to answer: “Certainly – Why do you even ask?” (Kleist 1978a: 389).

Similarly Fichte said (in 1807/1808): “I am talking to Germans in general, about Germans in general, not acknowledging the separating distinctions, which unfortunate events have created in the nation which is on” (Fichte 1845/1846: 266). Of course, when he was speaking, there was no such *one* German nation (if there ever had been). As Kontje (1999: 67) pointed out:

The question of national identity becomes particularly acute in Germany, which did not exist as a discrete political entity, never had existed, and would not exist for decades to come. To ‘be German’ around 1811 involved inventing traditions, imagining a community, putting on a mask, and trying out a role.

Not the nation state created the feeling of belonging together, but an invented community ultimately produced a state. Some may see the trademark of German nationalism in the conflation of the two concepts. That is to say, imbued with a nationalist sentiment that made the German nation a sole, indivisible whole, it is assumed that the nation tends to create the state. Reiss (2004: 252) quotes the

famous definition of the nation by Marcel Mauss which explicitly incorporates the state:

We understand by nation, a society integrated in material and moral terms, with a stable and permanent central power, fixed frontiers, and a relatively stable moral, mental and cultural unity among the inhabitants who consciously respect the state and abide by its laws.

But at the time of Kleist and Fichte Germany had no “stable and permanent central power”, although one could argue that it had some kind of “cultural unity”.

## 1. State-led and state-seeking nationalism

Tilly (1994: 133) distinguishes two different phenomena, which acquired the name *nationalism*: “state-led nationalism on one side, state-seeking nationalism on the other”. He defines state-led nationalism as one where rulers speak in a nation’s name and demand that citizens identify themselves with that nation. Rejai & Enloe (1969: 140) argued that

... in most of the currently underdeveloped, newly independent countries [...] authority and sovereignty have run ahead of self-conscious national identity and cultural integration. To this extent it can be said [...] Asia and Africa have produced state-nations [instead of nation-states].

The state is to create the nation, not the reverse. Kleist and Fichte, on the other hand, represent a state-seeking nationalism,

... where representatives of some population that currently did not have collective control of a state claimed an autonomous political status, or even a separate state, on the ground that the population had a distinct, coherent cultural identity.

Or, as Herder (1965: 251) mentioned in 1788: “For every people [*Volk*] is a people: it has its national education [*Nationalbildung*] as it has its language”. The importance of the national language is emphasised by Anderson (1985: 154):

What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue – is to the patriot.

In this instance it is not by chance that national philologies, the study of the vernacular rather than Hebrew, Latin and Greek (the holy languages) received its first impetus at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Imagination and indoctrination as tools for inventing a nation

One approach in contemporary theory on nationalism has focused on nations as “imagined” identities in order to emphasise nations as recently constructed and historically contingent forms of collective identity that never quite measure up to their claims of common purpose or ancient foundation (Doak 1997: 284, cf also Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Anderson 1983, Bhabha 1990). By contrast, the primordialist conception of the nation postulates

... that nations are ‘real’ (not imagined) entities. Nations so defined differ from other territorially defined units of governance (such as city-states, empires and states, which are not nation-state) because their inhabitants define their identities in cultural terms exclusively.

The constructivist position, on the other hand, views nothing that is fixed or predetermined in the concept of the nation:

A nation in this conception is anything but immutable. It is wholly subjective, dependent on psychology rather than on biology. It could be conceived almost as an affair of the heart, a spiritual communion born out of the complex web of social structures constituting people’s interests, perceptions, and identities (cf Dawisha 2002: 3-5).

Admittedly, nations are not simply “invented” or “imagined” without any agent of that “imagination”. Appiah (2005: 155) speaks about “soul making”, and asks whether the state should really encroach on the souls of its citizens: “When the question is framed this way, many of us recoil at the prospect”. But, of course, there has never been a

1 While Afrikaner nationalism claimed this distinct, coherent cultural and linguistic identity, and thus conformed to this image of nation-building, the post-apartheid South Africa has no such coherent cultural identity. While it will be interesting to analyse the current development of South African nation-building, this would demand a contribution on its own.

state without some influence on the character of its citizens. It starts from the fact that “we write in a language we did not ourselves make” (Appiah 2005: 156).

A catechism is an instrument of religious education (and indoctrination); Kleist's *Catechism* is an instrument of nationalist education (and indoctrination). The questions and the (correct) answers are pre-given and the student must learn them off by heart and thus retain them “in his heart”. In the chapter entitled “About the love of one's fatherland” the father asks his son why he loves his fatherland, and the son answers: “Because it is my fatherland”. Although this is obviously the correct answer, the father tests his son further: “Isn't it perhaps, because God has lavished it with many fruits, many beautiful works of art, and because many heroes, statesmen and wise men have made it wonderful?” The son resists this temptation and insists on the tautological answer: “Because it is my fatherland” (Kleist 1978a: 390). Halfmann (1998: 517) describes patriotism as the illusionary inclusion of the “person as a whole” into the “imagined nation” as against “the exclusion of the person as a whole from society, a phenomenon which has been reflected in social philosophy either as ‘alienation’ or as ‘subjective autonomy’”. Patriotism thus seems to be something which must both be learned (by rote?) and which is at the same time something which is always there and cannot be rationally or logically argued.

Nevertheless, education seems to be an essential prerequisite if one wants to create “patriotic” citizens. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* [*Reden an die deutsche Nation*], Fichte emphasises education as the very means to preserve the German nation in a moment of extreme crisis (Fichte 1846, 7: 280). What he envisages is “a national education of the Germans, entirely new, as it never before existed in any other nation”. While education so far has only admonished citizens to be orderly and moral, something which did not really work in everyday life, the new education should be effective in really “regulating according to rules certainly and without fail” every aspect of the future citizen's life. This, of course, is what Appiah calls “soul making”, and communist doctrine meant by “social engineering”.

Fichte's concepts are as circular as Kleist's: on the one hand, he views this education as being determined by the German national character (*Nationaleigenthümlichkeiten*); on the other, it should intervene to form this same national character. Like Kleist he accepts that the previous German Empire no longer exists, that if it ever had any reality at all, and was not just a construct of feudal law, it was now destroyed by the military force of Napoleon's armies. It is merely the common factor of German-ness (*Deutschheit*) which allows us to defend ourselves against the take-over by France, and through which we can regain a self which rests in itself (Fichte 1845/1846, 7: 266).

Fichte asks the question whether there really was something like German peculiarity and German patriotism, and whether that was worth preserving or aspiring to. However, such patriotism cannot, according to Fichte, be proven by a logical argument; this kind of argument cannot really show the true existence or the true value of patriotism. Again he entangles himself in a circular argument when he states that if one person in a million asserts that such a thing as German patriotism does exist, then that one person will be right and the millions wrong, a strange kind of decision, when the concept of patriotism does indeed involve not merely an individual and his beliefs, but also a group of people, whose common existence depends on the reality of the concept. In the end Fichte asserts that were he the only one to state that something like German patriotism exists and that it is worth fighting for, then it would exist, and others who were feeling the same, would be convinced, while those who did not feel the same, could not be convinced anyway (Fichte 1846, 7: 399).

### 3. National autonomy and the ability to act

What Fichte fears – and that is and was the fear of many political entities worldwide, and very often was the motor of liberation movements against colonial powers – is that a political entity which loses its autonomy, loses the ability to act, to freely determine its present tasks and its future, and becomes subject to a foreign power which determines its fate. It no longer has its own time, but its time is subjected to the time of its coloniser. Kleist, too, understood the victory of

France over Austria and Prussia and its re-organisation of the German political map, as a form of colonisation, and called for an anti-colonial war. I would suggest that this concern about having control over time (present and future) coincides with the new interest in the past and the sudden growth of historical thinking, which entails a form of control over the past (out of which present and future are seen to grow). Perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that the first academic chair of history was founded at the University of Berlin in 1810. The historical roots of a nation became an essential feature of the self-image of a nation. One of the most powerful metaphors is that of the “roots”: “people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (Malkki 1992: 27). In *The ethnic origins of nations*, Smith (1986: 5) maintains:

No enduring world order can be created which ignores the ubiquitous yearnings of nations in search of roots in an ethnic past, and no study of nations and nationalism that completely ignores the past can bear fruit.

In his essay *What is this war about (Was gilt es in diesem Kriege?)*, Kleist (1978c: 387) also uses the image of the roots and maintains that the war is about a community, “whose roots intervened in the soil of the time in thousand branches, like an oak”.

Barrington (1997: 713) defines the concept of nation as follows:

What makes nations unique is that they are collectives *united by shared cultural features (myths, values, etc.) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination* [...] nations are not just unified by culture; they are unified by a sense of purpose: controlling the territory that the members of the group believe to be theirs.

If a nation is occupied or colonised by another nation by military force, it loses this ability to control its own territory. Both Kleist and Fichte disregard the fact that strictly speaking there was no such “national” territory before Napoleon’s armies occupied various German states. They regard the “imaginary” Germany robbed of its control over its own territory.

The remedy for the situation, in which a nation can no longer act on its own volition, must be a fundamental renewal, the creation of a new origin, the beginning of a new epoch in time. As the Germans

were at that moment, however, subjected to a foreign power, that renewal must be brought about in such a way that the occupying power remains unaware thereof. (Fichte 1846, 7: 264-265). The fact of „the historical timing of nationalist demands, which have only become common political currency during the last two hundred years. Within those two centuries, furthermore, they have bunched in periods of imperial disintegration” (cf Reis 2004: 252) requires further study.

The fact that nations are “invented” or “imagined” identities does not mean that its citizens should live in some kind of dreamland, closing their eyes to the political realities that surround them. Fichte assumes that his audience will have the courage to look at realities, and to be honest about what they are seeing. The citizens must overcome the general human inclination to delude themselves about their own affairs and to believe in a less unpleasant image than that which is true (Fichte 1845/1846, 7: 268).

#### 4. Language and territory: the basis of the nation state

In addition to the reference to a common language and a common culture, which is supposed to be the founding principle of a nation, there is also the claim to a common territory, often confusing “soil”, “land” and inhabitants as one “natural” ensemble. Malkki (1992: 27) refers to the “powerful metaphoric practices that so commonly link people to place”, to the “soil”, and says that these “are also deployed to understand and act upon the categorically aberrant condition of people whose claims on, and ties to, national soils are regarded as tenuous, spurious, or nonexistent.” African people have laid claims to farms on the ground that their ancestors are buried in the “soil” of these farms, and that the white farmers on them therefore had no claim to the land. Such “widely held commonsense assumptions linking people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical”.

However, not everywhere is a common language and a common culture the founding principle of a nation. One can even argue that “modern states rarely include but one national society”. It is also a “fact that the participation of large sections of the people in national affairs



is rather fictitious” (Francis 1968: 339). For a long time, and in some cases even currently, states resemble the Austro-Hungarian Empire more than the nation-state envisaged by Herder. Yet Herder’s vision of the nation-state is considered to be the norm, whereas many African states which do not follow this pattern are considered “abnormal”.

Halfmann (1998: 514) argued convincingly:

The historical strength of the nation-state consisted in its capability to establish citizenship as a right of individuals within a territorially bounded realm. Its current weakness results from the limits of territoriality as a basis for membership vis-à-vis the transnational membership rules of other social systems of modern society.

Halfmann recognises that

... citizenship is an odd form of inclusion as compared to membership in other social systems because [...] it is attributed to all individuals equally, but only insofar as they belong to a particular nation-state.

This concept of citizenship which underpins the modern nation-state, even where it does not consist of linguistically, culturally or religiously uniform populations, can be traced to the political revolutions of the eighteenth century, in particular the Human Rights Declaration of the French Revolution which states that every individual has a right to be a member of a “nation”. Until the eighteenth century only those were truly “citizens” were free, owners of property, and heads of families:

This rule, thus, excluded women, children and servants as well as the poor and foreigners not only from representation in the polity but also in many respects from participation in society as such (Halfmann 1998: 515).

Nevertheless, this hardly “explain[s] the attachment that people feel for the inventions of their imaginations – or [...] why people are ready to die for these inventions” (Anderson 1983: 141). Is the love of the *Vaterland* perhaps not very different from “the other affections, in which there is always an element of fond imagining” (Anderson 1983: 154). But then the invention of Germany had as much to do with the existence of the enemy which threatened what the patriot loved, a superior enemy in many ways: the superiority of

the post-revolutionary French nation-state made up of citizens who were fired by patriotism. Kleist therefore views the combat which is about to start as an anti-colonial fight with the intention to control one's own time and fate. In his introduction for the journal *Germania*, he maintains:

This journal will be the first breath of German freedom. It will express all that which had to be silenced in the breast of worthy Germans during the last three years under the oppression of the French: all our sorrow, all misery and all happiness (Kleist 1978b: 385).

The amalgamation of nation and state that originally took place in western Europe and came to constitute the 'normal' way of organizing society is among the most remarkable features of the historical process of modernization (Reis 2004: 252).

It is the fusion of "nation" and state which makes citizenship different from the forms of inclusion in other social systems of modern society whose universalism is not (or not nearly as explicitly) restricted to nationals (cf Halfmann 1998: 514):

Within political science, as well as other social sciences, we have all been conditioned to think of the nation-state as the natural concept for dealing with power, authority, and solidarity. However, this conventional way of looking at the nation-state as a genuine compound, integrating feelings of belonging (identity) and compulsory authority in a given territorial space that is deemed sovereign, no longer seems natural or inevitable (Reis 2004: 252).

Reis (2004: 251) argues that "the merger of authority and solidarity that the nation-state accomplished for about 200 years is now threatened by the winds of globalization." But ...

It is not that nationalism or statism, or both, are about to vanish. What is changing is the monopolist position of the nation-state as the organizer of identity and solidarity, on the one hand, and as the sole champion of sovereignty, on the other (Reis 2004: 252).

While the concept of an "imagined" community addresses some of the aspects of nationalism, this "imagination" does not come about by itself, but has to be "invented" and the citizens of this community have to be indoctrinated by "education" and propaganda to "imagine" themselves as a nation. However, in an age of globalisation the concept of the nation would seem to have lost some of its power to rally

a people around a common identity. Yet the problem of the right to territorial self-determination and therefore of the control within the borders of a nation state seems to be as relevant as ever. Fichte's concern still needs to be addressed, especially in a multicultural nation where culture and language do not form the basis of the nation. In South Africa, between the "Afrikaner nation" of the past and the present "rainbow nation" everything has changed, but the concept of nation has remained, with all its advantages and dangers.

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