Lothar Brock

**Nation-building - Prelude or Belated Solution to the Failing of States?**

Violent conflict in former colonies is frequently attributed to the imposition of colonial borders which defy pre-existing cultural conditions in the colonised world. Paraphrasing Lord Salisbury, the present map of the former colonial world was drawn up by ignorant people, typically sitting in foreign offices in London and Paris who divided up the world without knowing what they were doing.\(^1\) In a similar way it could be argued that the post-colonial proponents of modernisation invented *nation-building* to cope with the consequences of colonial ignorance but that they, too, did not know what they were doing. Consequently, nation-building may have aggravated the problems it was intended to solve by ignoring cultural issues or distorting them.\(^2\) In the words of Joshua Castellini referring to the Case of the Western Sahara: ‘(…) postcolonial people have to exist within the boundaries created for them adhering to principles of nation-building, bolstered by the idea that people are similar and that differences between them could be overcome at the altar of the sovereign state’.\(^3\) Should political science stop thinking about how to keep people together and instead concentrate on devising means for ‘civilizing’ their separation? Should it advise the international community to give up its preoccupation with saving existing states in favour of managing their dissolution? Should both redirect their normative stance from building nations for states to dividing up states for nations?\(^4\)

Walker Connor, one of the most fervent critics of the notion of nation-building, observed in the early 1970s: ‘Scholars associated with theories of “nation-building” have tended either to ignore the question of ethnic diversity or to treat the matter of ethnic identity superficially as merely one of a number of minor impediments to effective state-

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3. Ibid. p. 530.
integration.’ Epitomising Connor’s argument, Daniel Conversi has recently stated that ‘the failure to notice the persistence of ethnic identity has represented one of the major blunders in political science since the Second World War’. The present paper acknowledges that classical notions of nation-building have indeed played down the role of ethnicity in social conflict, even to a point at which they helped to create a perception of social struggle that allowed for the establishment of ethnic rule in the guise of national self-determination. On the other hand, the role that ethnicity is being assigned in the social sciences today and the pervasive call for the recognition of ethnic difference may strengthen those forces that ‘seek to promote a political and legal environment conducive to the break-up of existing sovereign states (…) in a bid to constitute unicultural (…) units’. Thus, while the failure to notice the persistence of ethnic identity claims may represent one of the major blunders in the social sciences in the past, the failure to address the limits of ethnicity as determining factor of social conflict may be regarded some day as one of the greatest blunders in the social sciences of today. If this is to be avoided, the observation and recognition of difference have to be constantly balanced with the need to identify and support what keeps people together - not only regardless of their different cultural backgrounds but also by reconstructing what they consider to be their cultural background in accordance with the functional prerequisites of societies.

Bearing this in mind, I will argue that it is worth taking another look at nation-building and its potential for contributing to the resolution of social conflict. I do not suggest to revive nation-building as it was propagated in the 1950s and 1960s. However, I do argue that the notion of nation-building as such should not be regarded as obsolete in view of ‘ethnic persistence’. It rather gains in importance. The idea of nation-building highlights one of the functional features of societies - the existence of a special relationship between its members. But it does not derive this special relationship exclusively from the mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion, but posits the possibility that people are ‘hanging together’ for some common purpose on which they (learn to) agree among themselves. In this respect, difference is not taken for granted but rather is regarded as an object of change. With other words, a society has to accommodate difference, but identities constituting difference are

5 Walker Connor, op.cit., p. 29. The book contains a collection of essays from the 1970s and 1980s. The quotation is from ‘Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying
not fixed but always evolving. They are not monolithic but multi-faceted and allow for cross-cutting ways of positioning oneself in the various contexts of social life. Under this perspective, ethnicity can be deconstructed and reconstructed to meet the basic functional requirements of social life. In other words, in principle there is no objective, essential difference that would keep people from pursuing a common political project directed at forming or upholding a state which may provide for security, well-being and a sense of purpose among the people living in it.

The issue is not, of course, to persuade the people in a war-torn society to join hands for the definition and pursuit of such a project. However, the international community is called upon every day to do something about states which threaten to fall apart. It is in this context that the present issues need to be addressed. Though nation-building cannot be achieved by the international community, the latter can try to deal with ‘ethnic conflict’ in a way that is conducive to the pursuit of common political projects.

In elaborating this argument, I will first present my reading of the present debate on ethnicity. I will then deal with the classical notion of nation-building and its shortcomings regarding the recognition of the ‘ethnic factor’. As a third step I will ask what nation-building has to offer as a perspective for war-torn societies. Here I stress the idea of political as against ethno-centric nation-building. In this context I will refute the thesis that ethno-nationalist self-determination has its roots in the French revolution. In concluding I turn to the promises of functional nation-building.

The second discovery of ethnicity
A student from a West African country once came to me and said that he wanted to write a dissertation comparing ethnic conflict in Cameroon and Rwanda. I told him that he would have to recruit an anthropologist as a member of the supervising team. The anthropologist whom he asked remarked that she felt incompetent to supervise a dissertation which included a study of Rwanda, because she herself was working on West Africa, and actually not West Africa, but rather on Ghana, and not even Ghana as such but only Northern

Ghana. And she added: “You political scientists generalise about conflict in entire
continents if not the world in a way which is really breathtaking, to put it politely.”

The present paper, too, offers sweeping generalisations. That is certainly unsatisfactory
from the viewpoint of ethnic studies. But much of the attention which ethnic studies is
receiving today derives from sweeping generalisations even by anthropologists about basic
similarities between quite different phenomena, generalisations which present a picture not
only of parts of Africa, but of the world. Thus, in an article on ‘tribalism’ in Africa
published in the mid 1990s, Carola Lentz observes: ‘Ethno-nationalist movements in post-
Communist Eastern Europe, brutal “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia, radical
right-wing violence against foreigners in Western Europe and the growing attraction of
old-new racist ideologies, sometimes in the guise of seemingly liberal
“multiculturalism”…; these recent developments, like the racial conflicts of the 1960s and
1970s in the USA are a brutal reminder that ethnicity cannot simply be explained away.
Neither with modernisation theories about stubborn but dying relics of pre-modern
mentalities nor neo-Marxist concepts of “false consciousness” (…) In the years to come,
ethnicity, in whatever concrete form and under whatever name, will be so important a
political resource and an idiom for creating community that today’s social scientists and
anthropologists have no choice but to confront it’.8

With some exceptions, ethnic conflict in the South was not an object of curiosity in main
stream social sciences during the fifties and sixties. At that time, general perceptions of
what was going on in the world were largely influenced by the East-West antagonism on
the one hand and decolonisation on the other. In those days conflict was viewed by critical
scholars predominantly in terms of class struggle and by the proponents of modernisation
theory in terms of universal social change. One school of thought offered national
liberation as the solution to such conflict and the other offered nation-building. To the
extent that ‘ethnicity’ entered the picture, interest was predominantly focused on intra-
group behaviour. Early interest in inter-group relations (including ‘ethnic conflict’) met

8 Carola Lentz, ‘“Tribalism” and ethnicity in Africa’, in: Cahiers des sciences humaines (Vol. 31, No. 2,
The empirical reference in this statement can be read as pointing to new developments which force us to
address issues which hitherto have been neglected. At the same time, it implies that we are not only
witnessing change “out there” but also an epistemological change, a change of focus in the pertinent research
on social conflict. This change has become quite obvious in the past years and may even amount to a
paradigm shift in the study of social conflict.
with suspicion, especially in those countries that were the object of such studies. As Eghosa E. Osaghae from Nigeria has recently pointed out, at a time when state-led nationalism and developmentalism held sway, research on ethnic and other forms of conflict was considered anathema and researchers who studied them were labelled subversive and agents of opposition or imperialism.9

All this has now changed. Innumerable books and articles on various aspects of ethnic or ethnopolitical conflict have appeared in the meantime - not only in the West. In the early 1990s, an African research network on ethnic conflicts was initiated by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Though there is still no major centre for the study and management of ethnic conflict in Africa, Osaghae notes with satisfaction an increased research output on the subject, especially by left-wing radical scholars ‘who have not only become convinced of the reality of ethnic conflicts but are in the forefront of championing ethnic interests in the problematization of the national question’.10

The development addressed above may be viewed as the second discovery of ethnicity. The first discovery took place under the impact of ethnic conflict in the United States in the sixties. In view of the persistence of discrimination, reference to ethnicity was used by the black consciousness movement as a strategy for challenging cherished assumptions about the US melting pot society and the equal chances it offered to all and, correspondingly, as a strategy of emancipation. The old liberal slogan of equality was superseded by the new slogan ‘black is beautiful’. From this experience a broad emancipatory movement for the recognition of difference with special reference to gender emanated. Today, the claim of ethnic difference has to be viewed against the background of genocide. In this context, the „first debate“ on ethnicity has come under pressure to defend its emancipatory stance in dealing with ethnic difference. In other words, the genocidal violence of the 1990s can be read as affirming the need to recognise ethnic difference, but it can also be read as a warning

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10 Ibid., p. 56. The authors goes on to suggest ‘that, for the converted radicals, the passions of waging a class war which now seems more unlikely, have simply been carried over to the ethnic battlefield.’ Ibid., p. 57.
against elevating ethnic difference to the single most important determining factor of conflict. I will come back to this point in the next chapter.

The present surge of ethnic studies in the social sciences reflects an increasing scholarly uneasiness about explanations of social behaviour as they prevailed during the Cold War and under the sway of either modernisation or dependency theory. In those days it was quite popular to regard armed conflicts in the Third World as proxy wars. Given this assumption, it was to be expected that the bloodshed would end with the Cold War. However, except for a brief ‘race for peace’ in 1988, some of the old conflicts continued while new ones sprang up. What is more, these new wars seemed to be even more violent than the old ones and most of them had to do with claims of ethnic difference, despite the fact that the cultural bases of such claims had long eroded. There was thus a clearly felt ‘need to ask why ethnic boundaries are thoroughly maintained despite of pervasive change, including cultural impoverishment and even total assimilation’. This question implied not only that Western modernisation theory had failed to grasp the nature of social conflict in the former colonies, but also that this failure might have contributed to the increasing violence of social struggle in many of the new countries.

The failure of ‘classical’ nation-building to accommodate ethnicity
The ‘classical’ notion of nation-building viewed ethnic difference as pre-modern patterns of social differentiation which stood in the way of development and therefore should (and eventually would) be overcome. Karl Deutsch, in his much cited 1953 study on

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13 Daniele Conversi, op. cit., p. 562.
14 This was by no means confined to Western observers. Not a word was said about ethnicity in José A. Silva Michelena, 'Diversity among Dependent Nations: An Overview of Latin American Developments', in Eisenstadt and Rokkan, op. cit., pp. 232-248. Ali Mazrui in his contribution to the same volume refers to ‘tribalistic violence’ as ‘violence of identity’. But their is no doubt that violence can be overcome through nation-building which involves ‘firstly, cultural and normative fusion; secondly, the promotion of economic interpenetration between different strata and sectors of society; thirdly, the process of social integration; fourthly, the process of building institutions for effective conflict resolution; and fifthly, the psychological accumulation of shared national experience’. Ali Mazrui, ‘Traditional Cleavages and Efforts of Integration in East Africa’, in Eisenstadt and Rokkan, op.cit., pp. 469-493, on pp. 483 and 469. Cf. Rupert Emerson, 'Nation-Building in Afrikca', in Karl W. Deutsch and William J. Foltz (eds.), Nation-Building (New York: Atherton Press1963), pp. 95-116, who states: ‘It would absurd to assume that they (the communities in which African have lived their lives, L.B.) will not be highly significant factors for a long time. (...) it is more plausible to think that
‘Nationalism and Social Communication’, measured nation-building as the rate of assimilation and of mobilisation in a given state. The rate of assimilation was defined in terms of an increase or decrease of groups within a particular population who spoke the dominant language. The rate of mobilisation was defined as an increase or decrease of those groups which ceased to live exclusively in traditional, locally rooted systems of communication and began to be integrated into urban and national communication patterns. Assimilation and social mobilisation led to a weakening of traditional forms of social differentiation in clans and tribes. Nation-building, then, implied social transformation in the sense of modernisation. It took place in the context of an intensive interaction between the Western states and traditional social entities, but it was not brought about by Western modernisers. It rather resulted from the specific response of the local people to global modernisation pressures.¹⁵

Deutsch’s assessment of the causal relationship between mobilisation and assimilation fluctuated considerably, as Walker Connor has pointed out.¹⁶ In contrast to his 1953 study, he conceded in the early 1960s that mobilisation ‘may tend to strain or destroy the unity of states whose population is already divided into several groups with different languages or cultures or basic ways of life’.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he still upheld the general direction of his argument that modernisation could not proceed without the consolidation of the state, and this in turn implied the creation of a we-feeling among the people of the newly created states, no matter how long this took. In pursuing this evolutionary perspective, Deutsch was joined by a wide array of scholars.¹⁸ Their concept of evolution just like that of Deutsch was not necessarily mechanistic. As Stein Rokkan pointed out in a paper first prepared for a 1967 UNESCO conference on ‘the problems of nation-building’, the creation of a collective identity would most likely go along with major ruptures and thus


¹⁶ Walker Connor, op. cit., p. 34.


¹⁸ Cf. The contributions in Eisenstadt and Rokkan, op.cit. and in Deutsch and Foltz, op.cit.
was prone to produce profound social crises. However, according to the old concept of nation-building such crises could and eventually would be resolved in favour of the formation of a national identity. From this viewpoint, the present surge of ethnonationalism would not signal the breakdown of nation-building but rather testify to the conflicts that accompany it.

The notion of nation-building as presented above supported the ideology of developmental nationalism, and the latter can partly be criticised as a grand scheme on the part of the political elites in the new countries to deceive the population. Many of these elites were eager to establish clientelistic structures which were able to satisfy their drive for power and wealth. Development nationalism in the guise of nation-building came in handy as an instrument which could be used to legitimise clientelism as serving the common good and to disqualify those excluded as acting against the national interest. To put it more pointedly, where ethnic homogeneity did not exist, nation-building proceeded as the institutionalisation of ethnic rule in multi-ethnic states (ethnocracy). This was not only tolerated but actually supported by the aid bureaucracies of the North either because it was felt (in accord with the Deutschian perspective of long term change) that it would have a developmental payoff effect after all, or because West and East were competing for political allies and were more interested in buying loyalties than in supporting development and democratisation.

The ‘classical’ notion of nation-building can also be criticised for helping to undermine, albeit indirectly, the right to self-determination which has been recognised as a human right. The focus on nation-building was detrimental to the practice of self-determination in as much as it took the existing territorial order more or less for granted. Self-determination, by contrast, may challenge this very order because it is not at all self-evident who the subjects of self-determination are. After World War II, the principle of self-determination

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20 Cf. the account of the story of African ethnocracy in Eghosa E. Osaghae, op.cit., pp 58-63. The author notes: ‘In postcolonial African states certainly, the predominance and intensification of conflicts can be attributed, without being reductionist, to the violent and nondemocratic strategies employed by state operators since the colonial era’ (p. 59).

21 Secretary of State Robert Lansing, commenting on Wilson’s idea about self-determination as a precondition for peace, put this problem in the following way: ‘On the surface it seemed reasonable: let
first and foremost served as a basis for claiming independence and non-interference. This was, of course, a North-South issue with fairly clear-cut lines of contention. In this context, the question of who the people were received a straightforward answer. The people were all those living under colonial rule. However, ‘the people’ of the South were and are also living under a territorial order which was established by the colonial powers at their discretion. Furthermore, colonial rule was not geared towards community-building. Quite to the contrary, it fostered ethnic divisions (partly by inventing them) as part of the strategy of *divide and rule*. So while there was a clear understanding of what self-determination meant between North and South, such an understanding was lacking with a view to the South-South dimension of self-determination.

This uncertainty found its expression in a widespread fear that decolonisation might lead to chaos. In the case of Latin American independence in the 1820s, the same fear had prevailed and the solution introduced at that time was the principle of *uti possidetis* 22. The principle originated in Roman law and served to protect the distribution of possessions between individuals at a given time regardless of how this distribution had come about. With a view to decolonisation, the principle implied ‘that newly independent states will inherit the boundaries created for them by their colonial rulers. (...) The doctrine therefore merely recognised that in the interest of order, the current “photograph of the territory” at independence would have to be taken as a given, so that the process of development could be pursued’23. Since this could be expected to prove difficult, nation-building formed an indispensable concomitant to the principle of *uti possidetis*.24 However, nation-building, far from completing self-determination, lead to the institutionalisation of those deformations of self-determination which originated in colonial rule.

In sum, there indeed seems to be ample reason to criticise the notion of nation-building as constituting one of the greatest blunders not only of political science but of the social sciences in general - all the more so in view of the fact that by the 1970s *nation-building*...
developed into a business which functioned as an important source of income and prestige for the experts who were involved in it. However, the critique of nation-building from the viewpoint of ethnic persistence has its own problems. In the following I will address two of them. First of all, there is the question of to what extent violent conflict which involves ethnic factors is really an expression of rivaling ethnic identity claims. In connection with this point I will suggest that the persistence of ethnic orientations cannot explain conflict but is rather an expression of conflict. Secondly, I will argue that the critique of nation-building tends to be ethnocentric in that it neglects non-ethnic determining factors of political and social behaviour. In this context I will address the other side of nation-building: nation-building as an act of political emancipation and democratisation.

**Ethnopolitics**

As pointed out above, present pre-occupation with the persistence of ethnic orientations, in the social sciences responds to the continuation of violent conflict after the end of the Cold War and the apparent importance of ethnic cleavages in these conflicts on the one hand, the neglect of such cleavages by both, modernisation theories and theories of dependency on the other. Both types of theories interacted quite closely in marginalising ethnic conflict as an object of academic concern. Nation-building was part of this game, and it was played on both sides, since socialist development paradigms just like Western modernisation theory believed in assimilation through mobilisation. Such shortcomings of the grand old theories had, of course, become obvious before the End of the East-West conflict. Thus it was the revolt of the 1980s against positivism, the surge of constructivism, the critique of universalism, the spread of feminism and its impact on the study of difference, the ‘return of culture’ to international relations and the rapidly expanding debate on identity which prepared the ground for the present efforts to make up for past failures. Central to these intellectual movements were and are the notions of contingency and change. Contingency challenges us to re-examine our assumptions about the ‘hard facts of life’ in order to escape reification. It thus opens up the spectre of change beyond the horizon set by the views of those who prefer to see the world as being governed by unalienable laws. This epistemological and normative context underlines the importance of ethnic issues.
However, it is precisely the focus on contingency and change and the implied consensus that ethnic identities are evolving and not primordial which calls for a critical look at the notion of ‘ethnic persistence’. There are few who profess to primordialist explanations of violent conflict as being caused by ethnic difference. But even if we insist that ethnic identities are socially constructed we are not beyond falling into the trap of primordialism to the extent that the recognition of difference is interpreted as a necessary condition for overcoming violent conflict. As a normative project, the recognition of difference tends to essentialise ethnic difference by dealing with it as if it were (for the time being) an irreducible fact of life. There is nothing wrong with calling for the recognition of difference. The problem is, however, that nobody knows for sure what the difference is (about).

The instrumentalist challenge to ethnic difference as a causal factor in social conflict stresses the ability of political entrepreneurs to make use of any difference for its own purposes, even very small ones. That there is a lot to support this argument can easily be demonstrated with reference to the cases of Yugoslavia and Rwanda. At first sight, it would seem that not only the violent breakup of Yugoslavia but also genocide in Rwanda could be explained as a struggle between groups with rivalling identity claims. While Yugoslavia was split up among the various ethnic groups with the people of Kosovo (and of Montenegro) still waiting in line, the genocide in Rwanda could be explained as the attempt of one ethnic group (the Hutu) to rid the country of the other (the Tutsi). The peace that has come to those parts of former Yugoslavia in which the war was won by those struggling for self-determination could then be taken as proof that ethnic self-

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determination indeed was the issue. Accordingly, the continuing unrest in Rwanda could be interpreted as proof of the persistence of ethnic demarcations as causes of conflict.

Such a view, however, would be highly problematic in that it neglects the ‘banality of ethnic war’ as a war over power and material interests as John Mueller has demonstrated.29 Mueller develops his argument against those who see the Balkans as ‘a region of pure memory’ where ‘each individual sensation and memory affects the grand movement of clashing peoples’.30 In sharp contrast to such views Mueller writes: ‘The mechanism of violence in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda (…) is remarkably banal. Rather than reflecting deep, historic passions and hatreds, the violence seems to have been the result of a situation in which common, opportunistic, sadistic, and often distinctly nonideological marauders were recruited and permitted free rein by political authorities. Because such people are found in all societies, the events in Yugoslavia and Rwanda are not peculiar to those locales, but could happen almost anywhere under the appropriate conditions. On the other hand, there was nothing particularly inevitable about the violence: with different people in charge and with different policing and accommodation procedures, the savagery could have been avoided’ 31. Mueller refers to a poll conducted throughout Yugoslavia in 1990 (summer and fall) in which 61 % of the respondents flatly rejected the notion that each Yugoslav nation should have its own national state, while only 16 % fully agreed32. That people apparently changed their minds and some of them were even willing to use force against former neighbours and friends he attributes to manipulation, terror and opportunism, not ethnic self assertion..

As Mueller demonstrates, the terror was exerted first and foremost by irregular bands of marauders led by unscrupulous robbers, pimps, rapists or racketeers. They would divide people up by using threats, harassment or outright violence, thus setting in motion a chain reaction of collective fear and collective violence. As to the opportunism which came into play, it is easy to see how this worked. Media reports of both man-made and natural catastrophes time and again show how easily people get into a frenzy of looting and robbing once someone has started and those still standing aside begin to feel that they

31 Ibid., p. 43.
32 Ibid., p. 46.
would only lose out by not taking part. But how was it possible to manipulate people along ethnic lines in such an effective way that they all began to see the others as their enemies? Citing Cheryl Benard, who worked with Muslim refugees, Mueller suggests that the violence could not be taken as evidence of the strength of ethnic ties, but rather seemed to demonstrate the weakness and fluidity of political identity. Thus people were not really in a position to resist manipulation.

A situation of insecurity, threat and actual suffering develops a dynamic of its own, forcing everybody to take sides because that gives them a bigger chance of surviving or remaining unharmed. But does taking sides include killing others? In the case of Rwanda, there were some 50,000 hardcore killers. Even if we take into consideration that this figure amounts to no more than 2% of the male Hutu population over the age of thirteen, that does not take away any of the horror. On the other hand, it is not entirely cynical when Mueller remarks that ‘a situation in which more than 90% of the over-thirteen male Hutu population did not participate in killings hardly seems to justify the notion that the situation was one of all against all or neighbour against neighbour’.

Manipulation works by creating fear. This fear has to be directed so that it can be instrumentalised and this, in turn, is achieved by giving fear a name. In ethnic conflict it is the name of those who either consider themselves to belong to another group or who are forced to opt for it. As a result, new ethnic identities are called into existence or old ones are revived after having been almost forgotten. In a situation of acute crisis, these ethnic identities do not tell you who you are but how you survive (and perhaps how you harvest some windfall profits of violence if you are on the right side).

It would be difficult to find evidence that political leaders and their followers are being driven more by ethnic sentiment than by more material motivations. Thus it was the struggle to gain or retain power in the case of Yugoslavia, or the attempt to ward off any changes in the clientelistic system in the case of Rwanda, which lead to the instigation of

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33 Ibid., p. 55.
34 Ibid., p. 61.
ethnic strife. In more peaceful situations, too, ‘ethnicity’ is being instrumentalised in order to secure clientelistic advantages or to challenge existing clientelistic structures.\(^{36}\)

Ethnic conflict is very often fuelled by the activities of diasporas which may provide funds but also get involved directly in organising ethnically defined strife. Thus, Franjo Tudjman prevailed over his internal opposition with the help of rich Croat militants abroad, mainly in the US. The struggles of the people of East Timor and the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea also were largely financed from abroad. The UCK received its funds mostly from compatriots in Germany. The same holds true for the financing of the war of the Kurds against Turkey. This may be seen as an expression of the intensity of ethnic ties. However, while diasporas serve as a source of resources for political entrepreneurs in the mother countries, the rank and file abroad is not always volunteering to pay. In the latter case, they may be cajoled into contributing to ‘the common cause’ in more or less friendly ways. As to their own interests, the members of diasporas may play on their ethnic identities as a resource which helps them to establish themselves in the host country.\(^{37}\)

In sum, ethnicity has to be viewed as part of a universal desire to enhance one’s power and interests. It is brought to life as a strategic resource for the purpose of political mobilisation or to compensate for structural imbalances. But this is only one side of the coin. The other refers to the question why ethnicity works so well, for instance in comparison to class. Or, to put it the other way around, why has reference to class been dropped in the struggle over the distribution of power and wealth in favour of ethnicity? This is where culturalist considerations come in. Both, reference to class and ethnicity, address the need of human beings to situate themselves in the world, to develop a feeling of belonging and a sense of purpose in moving within or beyond familiar realms. Reference to ethnicity, however, picks up on one’s socialisation instead of breaking with it (as all the revolutionary movements if the past have tried to do - sometimes with brute force). It allows a person to remain at home when moving abroad instead of being turned into a functionary of externally defined causes, it tells you were your roots are instead of covering them up. It


plays on social community instead of a more abstract political unity, etc. This implies that
the perception of interests is determined by culturally embedded views of the world and the
self. Therefore, reference to ethnic ties is not only fostered by strategic considerations but
also by non-strategic communication. Just like terror itself, reference to ethnic ties tends
to develop a dynamic of its own which pushes it beyond the confines of pure
instrumentalisation. Thus we may observe the workings of ‘strategic ethnicity’, but we also
have to account for the non-strategical arousal of ethnic feelings. In brief, ethnicity is a
resource and an instrument in social struggle but it also shapes this struggle. 38

This is, of course, in line with constructivist reason to the extent that it insists that people
are not simply following some objective interest but that their understanding of what their
interests are depends on their ideas, their images of the world, their convictions etc. 39 But
what people do, is not only a result of the interaction of interests and ideas, but also of
reason and feelings. In this respect Walker Connor was right when he criticised nation-
building for its materialism and lack of understanding of cultural factors. 40 People are
driven by passion just as much as by interests and ideas. Racism, fundamentalism, and, of
course, nationalism are a mix of all three. People get carried away by their own feelings,
and this holds true not only for the masses, but for the elite, too. 41 But all this does not
imply that conflict is caused by ethnic difference as such. Rather, ethnic difference serves
as a fall-back position for identifying oneself and devising strategies of survival or
enrichment in times of transformation and conflict. The question is, where we go from
here. Do we emphasise ethnic qua cultural difference as a fact of life or do we
problematise the meaning of difference. In the following, I will turn to the latter.

Functional nation-building

38 cf. This is were Hasenclever and Rittberger draw a line between constructivists and instrumentatists:
‘While the latter suggest that, ultimately, determined leaders can manipulate religious traditions at
will and that the justification of violence is at best a rhetorical, but not a substantial problem,
constructivists insist that religious traditions are intersubjective structures that have a life of their own.’
Hasenclever and Rittberger, Does Religion Make a Difference, p. 649. Cf. Apitzsch and Brock xxx
39 Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1999), xxx
41 There is a tendency to conceptualize elites as rational actors and rational actors alone. Cf.
Hasenclever and Rittberger, Does Religion Make a Difference, p. 651.
In his critique of the former academic ignorance of ‘ethnic persistence’, Connor argues that the ‘surge of ethnonationalism (...) reflects a quite natural and perhaps even predictable stage in a process that has been under way for approximately two centuries’42. This process began with the French Revolution and will only end when all *ethnies* which have developed a national consciousness have achieved statehood. This way, ethnonationalism is viewed as a ‘sequential step in a historical evolution’43. The driving force behind this evolution is the increasing national consciousness of ‘potential nations’ in interaction with the universal recognition (achieved by the French Revolution) of the right to be free from ‘alien rule’. Pent-up aspirations to self-determination will lead to conflict which will persist until such aspirations are fulfilled. Along the same line, it may be argued that the West is making a mistake when it tries to preserve the unity of Serbia and Kosova, not because the traditionalist forces in Kosova would resist modernising pressures but because Kosova is following the call of modernisation and for this very reason is working towards attaining sovereignty. Karl Otto Hondrich argues that ‘it is not the West, but rather the embroiled peoples and dictators of the Balkans which are in harmony with the formation of a modern world society’. According to Hondrich, the latter are pursuing the modern project of matching political and cultural boundaries whereas the West is going against it. Since the West is trying to work against history, it is bound to lose: ‘ Against the forces struggling for the independence of the smallest nation that can be conceived, even the strongest military power is helpless’44.

This reading of the modern project is lopsided. It addresses only the one side of modern nation-building, the ethnonationalist tradition, and omits the other side, the struggle over political representation and participation. In a paper in which he addresses the contradictory success story of nationalism, Bruno Schoch (with reference to a slogan coined by R.R. Palmer) reminds us in an unequivocal way: At the beginning was “the democratic revolution”. Whatever the term ‘nation’ may have meant to the people in the Middle Ages, it was at the end of the 18th century, particularly in the context of the American and French Revolutions, that it attained a principally new, modern meaning45. Central to this meaning was the notion of popular sovereignty, which celebrated its first

43 ibid. 174.
44 Hondrich 1999 xxx.
historic victory in the American Revolution. True, the American Revolution was inextricably intertwined with independence from British colonial rule. The slogan ‘no taxation without representation’ did not really aim at a better representation of ‘American’ interests in London, but only served to legitimise the drive for independence. But there was no ‘American’ nation at that time and it was not at all clear who the subject of self-determination would be. This subject was constructed in the struggle over the question of what kind of political order was to be established in the former colonies.46 As is well known, this struggle was quite intense. When, with the help of the agitation instigated in the Federalist Papers, the issue was finally decided, this was not on ethnic terms. ‘We the people’ had been defined in the Declaration of Independence in terms of political freedoms and these freedoms constituted the American nation. Not included were women, slaves and the indigenous population. In this way the nation was exclusionary in spite of the fact that its beliefs were (and had to be) coined in universalistic terms. Nevertheless, these beliefs constituted a historic watershed in the development of the idea that the sovereignty of the state should reside in the people. This idea, in turn, lies at the heart of what may be understood as the modern nation-state.

Such an understanding of the nation as a community of people sharing the new beliefs in democracy, human right and popular sovereignty can also be derived from the French Revolution. The French Revolution began with the constitution of the revolutionary subject as Assemblée nationale. It proceeded by overthrowing the feudal system and declaring the Third Estate to be the people. Just like the American Revolution, the French Revolution involved exclusion, in this case of the representatives of the feudal system. But again, it did this in universalistic terms, implying that the ideal in which the utopia was embodied was not exclusion but freedom. This idea was embodied in the vision of the one and indivisible nation which, again, was not primarily about drawing (ethnic) boundaries but about providing a space for universal rights and freedoms. It can be argued, as Bruno Schoch does, that even in the war of 1792 the call ‘aux armes, citoyens’ addressed the need to

46 Richard Merrit xxx (Deutsch/Foltz)
defend the revolution not the integrity of the state. The enemies were not the Prussians but the reactionaries who wanted to turn back the wheel of history.47

The situation was different in Germany. There was no lack of enthusiasm for the French Revolution and the historic turn which it signified. In Germany, too, this positive response was part of a movement towards political emancipation (or a bourgeois revolution). It aimed at reforming the old order which was out of tune with the dynamic unleashed by the combined thrust of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. But it was the very fact that the political reform movement in Germany did not arise simultaneously with the French Revolution but followed it, and that the spread of the revolutionary ideas was mixed up with the projection of military force on the part of the French, which, at a relatively early stage, led to the distortion and displacement of the revolutionary ideals of political equality and emancipatory citizenship by ideas of ethnic unity and collective freedom vis à vis some ethnically defined other (e.g. the French occupation forces)48. This transformation was spurred by organic conceptions of the nation which formed part of the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution.

As a result, in the early 19th century two distinct conceptions of the nation developed: the Franco-American tradition of the nation as _demos_ and the Central European tradition of the nation as _ethnos_. Walker Conner is talking about the former but actually referring to the latter when he interprets contemporary ethnonationalism as an expression of the right to be free from alien rule. He dates this right back to the French Revolution. But this is only partly correct. The essence of the French Revolution was inward-directed in as much as political freedom was to be achieved by democratisation, not by demarcation. The right to be free from alien rule (i.e. the right to self-determination) has its historical roots not so much in the French Revolution itself as in its international implications. It resulted in an understanding of political freedom which centred around the idea of demarcation, not democratisation.


48 Bruno Schoch, ‘Nationalismus’, p. 175.
Neither the French nor the German nation is a product of ancient history and primordial identities. Rather they constitute responses to the historic need to establish modes of seeing the world and oneself which were in accordance with the civilisational shifts of the 18th and 19th centuries. Connor goes only half way in acknowledging this. He accepts that ethnonationalism as a phenomenon of modernity. But it is interpreted as an awakening of ancient identities. This understanding of ethnonationalism is very close to the Central European ethnonationalism of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. And it is liable to fall into the same trap of ethno-centrism into which the intellectual precursors of late national emancipation fell in the 19th century in Europe.

This is where the idea of nation-building comes back in again. It is my understanding that in spite of the weaknesses of the concept spelled out above, it is precisely the increasing reference to ethnic difference in social conflict which lends the concept renewed importance. As the above observations suggest, self-determination has an internal and an external dimension. The experience of the United States, France, Switzerland or even Great Britain for that matter, suggests that a strong domestic dimension of self-determination in the form of democratisation and the recognition of human rights can go a long way to accommodate groups with a wide array of self-ascribed identities. This is to say that there is considerable leeway for political (non-ethnic) nation-building as an alternative to the breakup of states confronting the spectre of ethnonationalism.

It is not surprising that the issue of minority rights has come up again after the end of the East-West conflict. After the Second World War there was a great reluctance to address minority issues. There were at least three reasons for this. The post-World War I experience in this respect was not very encouraging. The second reason was that in Central and Eastern Europe certain minority leaders had aligned themselves with the Nazis. The third reason was provided by the fact that millions of people were expelled from their homes after the war. In view of this it did not seem opportune to the great powers to take up minority issues 49. Instead, the regulation of minority issues was subsumed under general human rights provisions. As Jennifer Jackson-Priece points out, advocates of human rights either felt that human rights offered the most comprehensive solution to the

problem or that under the prevailing circumstances they were the only feasible solution. In the meantime much has changed. On the one hand there seems to be agreement that general human rights provisions are not sufficient to protect the rights of minorities, and on the other hand, after the East-West conflict the international political climate favoured taking minority rights up again.

However, nation-building requires more than a return to the special protection of minority rights. The protection of minorities (usually with the help of international legal instruments) tends to reproduce the problem it is intended to solve. What is needed is a change in the way minorities and majorities view each other. The most crucial point is not the mutual recognition of difference, but agreement on what is to serve as common ground. This does not re-introduce assimilation. It rather calls for a definition of difference that is in line with the need to construct a common understanding of the meaning and the workings of citizenship. This way, the notion of nation-building may help to underline the fluidity of difference and the malleability of identities as well as the need to strike a balance between the recognition of difference and the functional prerequisites of a society.

As to the first point, as briefly mentioned above with regard to the first discovery of ethnicity, the call for a recognition of difference was meant to serve an emancipatory purpose. It was to turn weakness into strength, features which served as the referent object of discrimination like colour or sex into foci of self-assertion (black is beautiful). To the extent that emancipation succeeds, however, the identities of the formerly discriminated and of the dominant group change and so does the difference between them. Classical nation-building posits that change is only significant when it reduces difference. A critical concept of nation-building would assume that significant change would turn antagonisms into diversity. In this way, difference would not necessarily vanish or be reduced but it would lose its potential as a threat to the identity, security or well-being of the other.

50 (Jackson-Priewe 1998, 100).
51 In 1990, recognition of minority rights was included in the Copenhagen Document which regulated international relations in the OSCE area. In 1992, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religions, and Linguistic Minorities. In accordance with these activities the EU made the recognition of the new republics which succeeded Yugoslavia contingent on the acceptance of national and ethnic minority rights on the part of these countries.
This leads to the second point, the need to strike a balance between the recognition of difference and the functional prerequisites of living in a society - as for instance spelled out in Dieter Senghaas’ civilisational hexagon\textsuperscript{52}. From what has been said in response to Connor it follows that the American-French tradition of nation-building would aim at the constitution of a \textit{we-feeling} based on political belief, not ethnic ascription. It would thus be open to the accommodation of groups who believe themselves to be ethnically different. But this would only be possible as long as such difference does not threaten in a noticeable or even provocative way the political beliefs around which the nation is constituted. When these beliefs appear to be threatened there develops a high receptivity to manipulation by those who want to make use of such a crisis for their own purposes (see the remarks on the ‘banality of ethnic war’ above). In such a situation the inhibitions which normally help to control violence may give way to a fateful readiness to use or tolerate violence. This can be expected to be even more pronounced when a nation, following the Central European tradition, is culturally defined.\textsuperscript{53} Nation-building which sought to avoid such development would have to see to it that the we-feeling at the national level is strong enough to counterbalance the different identities below this level. This implies playing down ‘culture’ as a source of social or political claims and playing up democratic political beliefs.

This abstract observation can be linked to concrete tasks which the ethnically heterogeneous society faces. One of the most important of these tasks is to re-read the basic beliefs around which ethnic identities are formed in such a way that this can strengthen and help to build a common belief shared by all groups that they form a (democratic) nation. For example, Islam is gaining an importance as a public issue in most other Western countries which it did not have a few years ago. The overwhelming feeling of the non-Islamic Europeans is that the constitutional order may be undermined. One of the reasons for this is the supposed unity of religion and state under present-day Islam, which would imply that as Islam grows stronger, it would want to take over the state. A careful study of Islamic teachings, however, reveals the possibility of an Islam which would be quite in accord with the basic political beliefs around which post-war European identities have been formed. Of course, a British, French, Dutch or German Islam would eventually change the identities of the respective countries as being Christian. But it could

do so by adding diversity, not by nourishing new antagonisms if it is grounded in substantial (and not only instrumental) pluralism.\textsuperscript{54} In this sense, cultural difference is played down to a point were it does indeed allow for mutual recognition. Likewise, multiculturalism is made compatible to functional nation-building based on the assumption that there are no primordial givens in the way people understand themselves and thus each other. Besides, difference which challenges universalism can only be preserved on the basis of universalism, because the recognition of difference calls for agreement on the need to recognise difference. Therefore universalism should not be viewed as contradicting a culturalist view of the world, the latter rather presupposes the former.\textsuperscript{55}

However, bearing in mind the ‘banality of ethnic war’\textsuperscript{56}, all this is an issue not only of good-will but also of material interests and power. So it does not suffice to state that there could be a British, French, Dutch or German Islam just as there is a respective Christian or Jewish culture if everybody accepted it. Rather, ‘the state’ (along with every social group) is called upon to open up and keep open the discursive space which is needed to achieve that minimum of common identity without which a society cannot function. In this way, state and nation have to preserve the constitutional order in collective fights over recognition and the distribution of resources, since the two are always one. On the other hand, since the constitutional order itself is open to change, protection of this order does not necessarily imply cementing the status quo, but rather keeping change within the confines of a general confidence that it will proceed in an orderly way so that things are not up for grabs.

But can such arguments be of any help when dealing with non-Western regions and countries? It obviously cannot in any direct way. There are no recipes to be extracted for

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53 I would like to emphasise, however, that this does not explain Anti-Semitism and Nazi rule in Germany.
55 As Beate Jahn so aptly demonstrates, the invention of the state of nature functioned as the basis for a hierarchisation of cultures. Beate Jahn, \textit{Cultural Construction of International Realities. The Invention of the State of Nature} (Houndmills: Palgrave 2000). But a critique of this construction is grounded in universalist ideas about substantial fairness and epistemological appropriateness.
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Africa from European history. However, the basic issues (finding a common ground in the face of a growing economic and cultural heterogeneity of societies) are not dissimilar. Furthermore, the origins of important political claims (self-determination, respect for human rights, democracy) which go along with present struggles in Africa or elsewhere lie in European history. So it seems crucial to understand what European history has to offer with a view to understanding such political claims and dealing with them. Finally, the ‘Northern’ countries are tied up more and more with social developments in the ‘South’, not the least through migration and the transnational communities that are being formed everywhere in its wake. This implies that diasporas in the North will increasingly influence political and social development in the South. And these diasporas blend in a peculiar way their cultural backgrounds with their experiences in the immigrant societies. This way, ethnicity is, paradoxically, becoming more cosmopolitan. This by itself does not mitigate cleavages, but it underscores the need to develop a cosmopolitan understanding of ethnic identity claims.

**Conclusion**

Nation-building, despite of its earlier shortcomings, is not obsolete, neither with a view to ‘ethnic persistence’, nor with regard to globalisation. The persistence, if not revival of ethnic identity claims does not explain conflict, but rather is an expression of conflict inherent in the great changes that are going on around the world and which are conveniently described today as globalisation. In the wake of the letter, ethnopolitics are becoming a global issue themselves. As such they are the expression of transformation while at the same time shaping the struggles which transformation entails. In other words, ethnopolitics are a dependent and an independent variable of social relations in the context of present world developments.

Ethnopolitics, though they aim at drawing clear cut lines between friends and foes, are highly complex. In ethnopolitics, rational choice mixes with pent-up feelings, calculated mutuality with non-strategic solidarity, reason with passion, knowledge with faith. Accordingly, violent conflict among people with distinct identity claims is the result of at least three factors. First of all there is the rational choice of political actors both, on the part leaders and followers, to instigate or take part in violence for specific purposes. Secondly, there are culturally embedded world views and emotional needs which come to bear - again on both sides, leaders and followers. Thirdly, there are the escalatory dynamics of
terror which force people into taking sides. The relative weight of these factors changes from time to time. But it is probably safe to state that the higher the scale of terror, the higher the dynamic will be that forces people into taking sides regardless of their beliefs. Terror enhances opportunism. To what degree the elite remains in control of the action it has unleashed, is an open question. However, again it can probably stated with some plausibility that the behavior of the elite is not solely determined by instrumental reason, but as that of anybody else also by emotional needs of a ‘human’ and a culture-specific brand.

From this it would follow that the task for the international community is also threefold. It has to help scale down the incentives for choosing violence, e.g. by stopping the alimentation and financing of violent conflict via the world market; it has to help provide a space for speaking about injustices in specific cultural contexts e.g. by pursuing a human rights policy which is sensible to the cultural settings in which it operates; finally, the international community should try to exert its influence in acute conflict in a way that would break the escalatory dynamic of terror, for instance by intensifying efforts at mediation, policing, confidence building, etc. As is well known by now, any external engagement in conflicts may, as an unintended consequence, help to prolong violence through the resources which such an engagement brings in to the area of conflict. This is a dilemma which cannot be solved, but at least it can be reduced by special training and monitoring. This course is already being pursued at least on the NGO-level.

Ethnopolitics are not a left-over of pre-modern times as the old notion of nation-building implied. Rather they appeal to ‘ancient bonds’ in order to enhance resources (money, support and commitment) in the social struggles of today which include, of course, shaping the future. This underlines the need to counterbalance ethnopolitics by the politics of nation-building in the political (as opposed to the ethnic) tradition. This conclusion is also supported by the wide-spread agreement, that despite of globalisation the state is here to stay for the foreseeable future, so that the political differentiation of world society will retain a strong territorial element. On the other hand, this does not imply the need to work out a grand scheme for the territorial adjustment of the world political map to ethnonational demarcation lines. When, at the beginning of the 19th century, the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte voiced the idea that peace could only be achieved if all people lived in states with ‘natural borders’, Friedrich Gentz, a student of Kant,
sarcastically asked how many wars Herr Fichte would allow to be fought in order to put
this principle of peace into practice. This question has not lost any of its sting today.

This is another reason why a second reading of nation-building may be helpful. This
would, of course, have to avoid the mistakes of the first reading, especially regarding the
assumption of a causal link between mobilisation and assimilation. A second reading of
nation-building should also overcome the tacit normative bias in favour of assimilation, to
the extent that the latter was understood as a eradicating difference. On this basis nation-
building could help to focus on the formation of national communities beyond ethnic or
otherwise defined difference. This would imply the primacy of political beliefs over ethnic
or other ascriptions. The political beliefs, in turn, should not stand in contradiction to
universally agreed standards (democracy, human rights). This way nation-building would
interact with international discourses on substantial and procedural issues of how ‘states’
should be run and peace should be kept.

A second reading of nation-building also would have to accommodate the increasing
importance of post-national frameworks of reference in high and low politics and the
formation of transnational communities in the wake of modern migration. This would help
to reduce the exclusionary aspects of nation-building. To the degree that this happens the
nation may make way for some other focus of making the world ‘hang together’,
though it may also fall apart on its way to a new order.

\[57\] Ruggie xxx