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# The Inner Frontier

**The Place of Nation in the Political Theory  
of Democracy and Federalism**

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## Preface

*Is there a place for the nation in democratic theory?*

Frontiers are the sine qua non of the emergence of the “people”; without them, the whole dialectic of partiality/universality would simply collapse. But the more extended the equivalential chain, the less “natural” the articulation between its links, and the more unstable the identity of the enemy located on the other side of the frontier.

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*

- But you know what a nation is? says John Wise.
- Yes, says Bloom.
- What is it? says John Wise.
- A nation is the same people living in the same place.
- By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that’s so I’m a nation for I’m living in the same place for the past five years.
- Or also living in different places.
- That covers my case, says Joe.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Does the *nation* have any place in democratic theory? If so, what is *its place*? What specific conceptualization of the nation, among the many available, would this entail? If, on the contrary, the nation proves to be too particularistic and inexorably linked to a specific set of theoretical postulates and political practices, should we dispense with it and its logic when thinking about democracy today? In turn, should we develop a democratic theory based primarily on categories of citizenship? In sum, are nations and democracy compatible? This book attempts to address this overarching question.

The answer to this question is that the national dimension, however much it has been over-signified by holistic, sublimated and essentialist historical uses, is indispensable for democratic political philosophy. Efforts to replace it with concepts, however pertinent, such as “civic patriotism”, “constitutional patriotism” – in their non-positivist versions – or even “cosmopolitan democracy” are futile. The nation’s inclusive and excluding dimensions, its identitary function (collective or individu-

al), the emotional effectiveness, meaning and mobilizing capacity of its interpellation, the close connections which intertwine it with citizenship, coupled with the territorial configuration of state power and the genesis of political will *inter alia* place the nation, in a problematic but unavoidable manner, at the very center of modern democracy.

The nation does not possess a single logic. On the contrary – as its historical manifestations and comparative political studies have shown – the nation constitutes, to a great extent, an *empty signifier*; a chain of meanings and equivalences susceptible to very diverse orientations and syntheses; a sphere of a contingent tension between particularity and universality. What's more, as a space of permanent political-ideological rearticulation, the meaning of the nation becomes, in effect, a *floating signifier*; an always-shifting object of open or overlapping struggles for hegemony. For this reason, abandoning the common territory of the national – seeing it as definitively lost and forever fixed in an organicist and essentialist vocabulary, trapped between internal and external historical borders, situated in the complete exteriority postulated by civic or constitutional patriotism – instead of proceeding from its decided political reformulation, leads one to ignore a major dimension in the construction of peoples in modern democracies. This *flight from the nation* leaves, in the hands of nationalisms (emanating from the state or separate from the state), the monopoly of the very setting in which, to a great extent, the daily struggle for the intellectual, moral and political direction of the country takes place. The problem is not with the *inner frontier* itself, as there is no seamless political space without borders; there are always borders that appear among the citizenry, sometimes superimposed one over the other, sometimes in conflict, and often contested (for example class, property, legality, citizenship, nationality, religion, gender, language, lifestyles, etc.). While the democratic principles of popular sovereignty and republican citizenship can delimit borders, they nonetheless weave and unweave the latter through a militant, always questioned (and ultimately dissatisfying) inclusive openness based on the web of equivalences that constitutes a people. Problems arise from the majoritarian nation's demarcation of an organic, unilateral and excluding closure over a given territory, from the homogenizing and substantializing completion of its constitutive chain of meanings, from the authoritarian closing of the border that defines us/them and that which belongs/that which is foreign. This eradicates equality, freedom and pluralism within the community.

Rethinking the place of the nation through a democratic conceptual apertura requires two peremptory tasks. The first, of course, is to completely revise the foundations of political theory which, whether from a liberal or a republican perspective, has assumed as resolved the issue of

the *demos* or *demoi*, the issue of who are the people or peoples upon which the legitimacy of the state is built, how they are constructed and how they interrelate. This is an issue that is, if not prior to then at least parallel to any discussion on the criteria of justice that constitutes the basis of democratic institutions. The second is to submit nationalist concepts of the nation – whose communitarist and holist excesses are incompatible with the unrenounceable pluralist, deliberative and republican demands of the most exigent formulations of democracy – to radical scrutiny and reformulation.

The arguments that follow tackle the difficult task of confronting the morass of the nation with republicanism through the apertura of normative political theory. The book advances a theory that is intended to be contextual, that is attentive to specific national problems of the present age, and that is informed by the contributions and debates generated by social scientific research on nations and nationalisms.

The first chapter entails a detailed analysis of the work of Sieyès and Fichte, two of the most profound political thinkers on the idea of the nation, and shows how an unexpected common nexus appears, as vivid as the differences separating their two perspectives, connecting a thinker who tries to theorize the republic in the absence of the nation with a thinker who ends up theorizing the nation in the absence of the republic. Although they draw very different conclusions, both thinkers share the thesis that the state must be, in some way or another, the creator of the nation and that all processes of constructing a state are also processes of constructing a nation. These overarching similarities introduce the very problematic monist logic that all states must carry within them only one nation, or, seen through a glass darkly, that all nations must procure their own sovereign state.

The second chapter develops a systematic critique of the ethnic nationalism/civic nationalism dichotomy and demonstrates that the concept of “civic patriotism”, the ideal of citizenship which supposedly has nothing to do with the nation or nationalism, is unsustainable, both for theoretical and empirical reasons. After elaborating an analytical alternative to this much celebrated *yet erroneous* dualism, the utility of this alternative is illustrated through the use of a detailed case study: the historical process of the nationalization of the French republic through which the state, under the auspices of a “République unie et indivisible”, imposed the ethnocratic political geography of *une nation unie*.

The third chapter shifts from political philosophy to discourse analysis and analyzes the basic narrative fabric of the nation. That is to say chapter 3 explores the schemes or interpretive frameworks of nationalist ideology and reveals its fundamental components and mechanisms: the

intimate internal and conceptual connection between the definition of the nationalist “us” and the institutional arrangements and formulas of the state. The chapter focuses on the constitutive power of the nation in its strictly *ontological* function – its political production of a concrete national reality – instead of focusing simply on its expressive character or on the *ontic*, that is to say the nation as an expression of a crystallized “objective” reality. This produces, in contrast to the generic and minimalist label of “nationalism”, a more nuanced vision of at least three different current politically active versions of the idea of the nation. It will be argued that elements appearing in some of these versions create an essential common ground for a necessary debate or consensus on the postulates of pluralist federal republicanism.

The fourth chapter develops a *non-nationalist concept of the nation*. It does so by going beyond the perspective sketched out by the recent debate on “liberal nationalism”. This debate has attempted to articulate a thesis linking the autonomy and liberty of citizens with their belonging to a linguistic and cultural community that provides the contextual basis for decision-making. The republican thesis is thus recast and imbued with the understanding that the nation, redefined from a *pluralist perspective*, can meet democratic theory’s most demanding requirements: representation, deliberation and inclusion.

The fifth and final chapter integrates this non-nationalist concept of the nation (neither “civic” nor “ethnic”, but rather a political-cultural and republican *pluralist federal conceptualization of the nation*) within a normative theory of *plurinational federalism*. The latter, based on principles of liberty and equality, adds a synthesis of self-government and shared government and a synthesis of unity and diversity to the conceptualization of the *non-national nation*.

The reader will undoubtedly recognize the intellectual, political and (possibly) the existential traces of the experiences of the *people of peoples* or (once the concept has been de-substantialized, de-sublimated and re-politicized) of the *nation of nations* that is Spain. I am aware that a work such as this, aspiring to build bridges and generate discussion (and not a diluted and confused consensus between distant positions in our public and political spheres) runs the risk of leaving its detractors unconvinced and might fail to create the common ground necessary for addressing counter-arguments and perceived flaws in the book’s core contentions. For some, a federal and pluralist conceptualization of the nation will appear to lack concreteness, substance and the ability to mobilize. Others will see in it unacceptable concessions to the logic and vocabulary of nationalism. In the study of nations and nationalism, the most effective political arguments are often normatively unacceptable

and sometimes the most normatively pertinent contentions are excessively arid and vague in comparison to the clarity of myth. The following pages were written with the modest and perhaps illusory hope that they will help to improve the quality of political-intellectual debate, help to overcome common and repeated misunderstandings, and challenge concepts and so-called evidence that have been uncritically rehashed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.