

Nation State in Geography

The Nation State formed in Europe from territorial States that emerged from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which established an order based on concordance between the religious identity of the sovereign of a territory (Catholic or Protestant) and that of his subjects. The personal links of the feudal system were replaced by a more stable territorialisation of religious identities, ensuring durable peace. The awareness of belonging to a people or a nation prepared the ground for the arrival of a new model, which developed with modernity: the Nation-State associated with a "territory", delineated by precise, mapped boundaries. The two earlier forms of the State were the city-states, with their territory restricted to a city and its immediate rural environment, and the empire, with its far larger territory, encompassing several ethnic groups or nations, and with ill-defined zonal boundaries, of which the "marches" are an example. These two earlier forms of the State were characterised by the plurality of their ethnic and/or national identities, and by various degrees of cosmopolitanism, while the Nation-State is characterised by a single dominant nation, which can concede the coexistence alongside of national entities with or without particular status or rights.

The geographer and founder of French human geography, Vidal de la Blache (1908, 8), approached the Nation-State of France at the start of the 20th century from its territory, referring to a "contrée politique", calling on a geographical individuality forged by humans on a fragment of the Earth's surface with no physical unity. *"It is in this way that a "contrée" (region, land) takes form and differentiates itself, and that it ultimately becomes a sort of medallion coined in the image of a people"*. Giving precedence to the relationships between humans and the soil, he divided the French territory into small units of landscape on the basis of physical and agrarian geography. It is only in his conclusion that he shows the role of the State brought about by the road network, a centralising force around the capital. His manuals and his atlas describe a [world](#) in which continental and colonial empires occupy most of the space in Asia, central and eastern Europe and Africa. States, which he does not refer to as Nation-States, are seen as being found above all in Europe and Latin America (P. Vidal de la Blache, P. Camena d'Almeida, 1903). This geographical view of the State was generalised by Lucien Febvre (1922): *"Thus all States are amalgamations of fragments, assemblages of pieces detached from various natural regions, completing one another, adhering together and forming a genuine unity from their associated diversities"* (L. Lefebvre, 1970, 338). He considered that there were natural regions forming States, such as Europe, the most characteristic because he thought there was *"an indisputable relationship between the geographical diversity and the genesis of political formations"* (Max Sorre, 1948, 110). The notions of State, territory, route, boundary and capital were closely associated by J. Brunhes and C Vallaux (1921), who returned to the theories of [Ratzel](#).

It was from the first World War, which favoured the emergence of nationalisms, that geographers turned their attention to Nation-States as such, and began to view them as meaningful territorial units. Max Sorre (1948, 91) propounded the geographical issue of the Nation-State: *"What are the historical relationships and what are the present relationships of these groupings that gather millions of human beings) Nations and States - with their geographical settings and in particular with the physical environment?"* He distinguishes the Nation from the State. The Nation, in the words of Renan is a "soul, a spiritual principle". It is based on *"a common treasure of traditions, painful or glorious memories and the will to preserve and enrich it [...]* The State is different. *It is a legal entity possessing executive and coercive agency [...]* In principle, it draws its legitimacy from its activity in the general interest of the community, and its need for peace, security and justice" (Max Sorre, 1948, 92). The State does not necessarily coincide with the Nation, but it can result from the action of a dynasty, an individual or a group that ensures the permanence of a bureaucracy and a State system.

The Nation is not in itself a concept restricted to a so-called national territory, but can exist outside, in a [diaspora](#) and in distant communities where individuals seek to preserve their original identity, which distinguishes them from their surroundings. The State on the other hand has a territorial base accommodating a fragment of humanity, according to Ratzel (1903). The human component places the influence of the soil and the extent of the State and its population at the fore. However, territorial continuity is not a condition, since a State can extend to territories that are distant and separated, for instance by sea in the case of an archipelago.

The State and the Nation have clearly been associated by moving beyond the territorial framework of the State defined by boundaries, to call on the notion of the Nation, with the example of the French nation which has been defined as *"resting on a community of feelings, certainly, but also on relationships of interest. These interests derive from the environment itself"* (J. Ancel, 1936, 103). This geographer distinguishes the Nations of the 19th century, *"born from the Romantic renaissance, which in its turn descends from the French Revolution [...]* Natural frameworks and physical links, past history, in particular the language, and above all complementary lifestyles, all of which combine slowly, with variations, complexity and freedom. For the land or the spirit can favour political constructions: they never impose them" (J. Ancel, 1936, 104). This concerns France, Germany and Italy. Jacques Ancel then

talks of the Nations of the 20th century, the most recent additions to Europe: the Balkan states, which emerged from the coagulation of lifestyles and differing territories via the language, and a literary renaissance, an essential instrument of their independence, propagated from nuclear States that gradually extended their territory and are still seeking to continue.

In a world where there is increasing circulation of people, goods, capital, ideas, and all sorts of movements, the concept of "iconography" (a system of symbols) was proposed by [Jean Gottmann](#) to explain the compartmenting of the world into more or less stable political units that resist movement: "*To fix humans in the spaces they occupy, to give them the feeling that there are links that bind the Nation and the territory, it is essential to integrate regional geography into the iconography. Thus in geography iconography acts as barrier to movement, a factor of political stabilisation*". (J. Gottmann, 1952, 221). Gottmann sees in what he calls the modern Nation-States "*the clearest, most perfect type of these compartments, evidencing a movement that appears to be reaching maturity*". Thus he sees this as the most elaborated form of "differentiated geographical space", on the grounds of the "fundamental principle of spatial differentiation", which according to him possesses "a value that is quite as universal as the human habitat" (Gottmann, 1952, 5-6).

It was the geopolitics of Yves Lacoste and the journal *Hérodote* that placed the notion of the Nation-State at the centre of the approach, putting the emphasis on relationships between power and territory. "*The Nation-State can be considered as a type of State where the majority of the population is attached to a single Nation*". Its population "*provides support for the State, whatever the regime, whenever there is conflict with other States*" (Y. Lacoste, 1995, 588-589). It is different from the Empire, pluri-ethnic or multinational; but it can comprise ethnic minorities enjoying cultural and political rights, recognised or demanded.

For most geographers, the Nation-State originated in Europe in the 19th century, either from a strong, centralised State that "forged the Nation" over time in the territory it controlled (the case of France) or from a nation characterised by a common language and a culture that "forged the State" on its pre-existing territory (as with Germany). But the simplification based on these two models of France and Germany is deceptive, because "*the Europeans invented such a large number of Nation-States that they make the use and the diffusion of a single model that they have generated not very credible*" (S. Kahn, 2014, 243). Luxemburg, Switzerland, Bosnia, Macedonia, Belgium, Estonia etc. do not correspond to either of the two models, but are nevertheless considered as Nation-States and members of the European Union, or at least its associates. Beyond this diversity, the common characteristic is attachment to a territory that is viewed as national.

After the second World War, the territorial State became the main political structure serving to oversee populations and partition the world. "*The modern State thus took over as a generalised form of political and military organisation, established on a territorial basis*" (O. Dollfus, 1990, 336). The proliferation of the number of States in the second half of the 20th century resulted from the dismantling of the colonial empires of the Western powers and the USSR. While there are worldwide a little under 200 territorial States of highly variable size, they are not all Nation-States, but are tending towards that status. The territorialised Nation-State appears as an ideal or a norm that most peoples would like to reach, when they have not already formed one (O. Dollfus, 1995). In the vast Eurasian space, where several types of multi-ethnic empires and city-states were dominant before the intervention of Western colonial imperialism, pre-colonial territorial States prefigured the Nation-States created after colonisation, at the time of independence. The "agrarian" States of the Indian type (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia) exercised decreasing control from the centre outwards to the periphery, with zonal-type boundaries. This "mandala" State was not defined by its perimeter or boundaries, which were ill-defined and fluctuated, but by the power, greatness and sphere of influence of the centre. In contrast, the Chinese version of the agrarian State (China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan) was a hierarchical model with a strong central authority, a clearly defined social stratification, and an expanding, dominant culture. The aim was to form an interior, clearly subdivided space tending toward homogeneity, with linear boundaries. Present-day Asian States are derived from these former States, but following policies of reform and modernisation making reference to European models of the Nation-State, even in Thailand despite the fact that it was the only State that escaped colonisation. It can thus be said that the Asian Nation-States, although they derived more or less directly from pre-colonial or pre-capitalist States, were influenced, in the colonial period and after independence, by European models via their nationalist movements. The post-colonial state order in the Asia extending from India to China is not fundamentally different from the order that existed before the arrival of Western imperialism. Since the end of the second World War it has shown considerable stability (M. Bruneau, 2014, 259-263).

However, in the Middle East and the Balkans, the end of the multi-ethnic empires was followed by considerable instability and a state order that has often been questioned up to the present day. The multi-ethnic empires gave way to Nation-States derived from their dismantling. Turkey, following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and 1913, prolonged by the Atatürk State (1920-1950) saw an extremely violent form of ethnic-national homogenisation, eliminating or assimilating its ethnic minorities, with the exception of the

Kurds, who were distributed over four neighbouring countries and have aspired since 1920 to the creation of their own Nation-State. Most Arab countries, with the exception of Egypt, have not yet managed to set up sustainable socio-political and territorial structures to form a genuine Nation-State (Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Libya for example). The same is true of the Balkan states derived from the dismantling of the Yugoslavian federation.

The transition from empire to Nation-State was far less painful in Iran than in Turkey, because the cover of the Persian empire had long since reduced and re-centred on the Iranian plateau from the early Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). The Safavid dynasty had already operated a centralisation and a strengthening of socio-cultural cohesion in the 16th century by way of Shia Islam, which was continued by the Qajar dynasty (1787-1925) to the start of the 20th century. Throughout its long history, Iran has always given precedence to a logic of religious domination (Mazdaism and later Shia Islam) and cultural domination (the Persian language and literature) over and above the various peripheral ethnic and linguistic identities, recognised as of subordinate rank. There is good articulation between the Farsi-speaking majority and the large Azeri minority speaking Turkish, well integrated into the state system and very prominent in the two most recent capitals (Tabriz and Tehran). The Iranian Azeri population thus have a full place in the centre of this empire that has now become a Nation-State (Bruneau, 2014, 256-268).

The supremacy of the Nation-State has in recent decades been called into question by the globalisation of the economy and the proliferation of networks of all kinds (financial, entrepreneurial, diaspora, confessional). There is today an increasing fragmentation of Nations. In the industrialised countries as well as in developing countries, there is a rise in regionalism, and demands for autonomy or even independence. "Regional nationalism" is developing, for instance in Europe, where wealthy regions such as Catalonia, Scotland, the Belgian Flanders or Padania in Italy no longer exhibit solidarity towards poorer regions in the Nation-State to which they belong. The increase in international exchanges and in mobility in the setting of capitalist, liberal globalisation accentuates territorial inequalities. Thus the 21st century is seeing a proliferation of post-national conflict, which may not necessarily lead to secession, but possibly to federalism or marked decentralisation, questioning the need for the territorial cohesion that is specific to the Nation-State (L. Davezies, 2015). Contrasting with this fragmentation of the Nation-States, supranational or transnational economic and in some cases political institutions, sometimes gathering several Nation-States, are another form of post-nationalism, the most advanced being the European Union. The construction of Europe abolishes neither national sovereignty nor the national territories. It combines them and weaves a European territory that is different from national territories, and that is a political territory for many of its citizens (S. Kahn, 2014). The Nation-State nevertheless remains an essential level of regulation and governance in the worldwide political organisation of populations and the different human communities. And this makes it an essential subject of study in geography.

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