

Defining the Nation? Dissolving the Problem

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What is a nation? This question remains pertinent in a world where the independence of peoples is still considered of value. If we accept that nations are justified in demanding self-determination, then we must consider what constitutes a nation in the first place. How can we define a nation? The apparent problem that arises is that while we cannot define a nation objectively, we cannot say that it exists only subjectively. A Wittgensteinian approach, I believe, can assist by revealing a nation's existence as neither objective nor subjective. While it may appear to be 'given', it is underpinned only by our everyday use. Yet the nation is not arbitrarily invented, for there are rules governing this use. In this article I will consider, firstly, why the issue of the nation's existence is important, and why it might appear that a definition is needed. Secondly, I will attempt to show that Wittgenstein's concept of 'grammar' can help, not by solving the problem, but rather revealing it to be a question that arises from a misunderstanding. Finally I will illustrate how a Wittgensteinian perspective allows us to assess demands for independence and to understand the conflicts that these demands can create.

Defining the Problem

Defying the predictions of the emergence of global communities and cosmopolitan identities, the concept of self-determination continues to shape the aims and ideas of political groups. Calls asserting the right to sovereignty and all that it entails reverberate from all corners of the world, rattling the composition of the international system, and raising the hopes of some and the hackles of others. How legitimate are these demands? What damage might they cause? The ratification of various new states in the recent past has led to instability, exclusion and war; secession has brutal consequences, and yet so does blocking the independence of a nation or a people who desire it. It seems hard, if not unfair, to deny a 'people' the right to self-determination.

For almost a century, the right to self-determination has been acknowledged as one of the cornerstones of international law. In 1918, Woodrow Wilson declared to the US Congress that: "National aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. Self-determination is not a mere phrase it is an imperative principle of action" (Nawaz, 1965: 83). This right has been enshrined in Article One of the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which reads: "All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

This declaration has perhaps produced more confusion than clarity. Is the right to self-determination the same as the right to secession? *Why* is a 'people' or a 'nation' entitled to self-determination? And - the question to be addressed in this paper - what constitutes a 'people' or

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'nation' in the first place? These issues of the legitimacy and ownership of the right to self-determination are too often neatly side-stepped, even when they bubble to the surface in a seething international conflict.

It is telling, for example, that regarding the issue of independence for Kosovo, the focus by analysts has been the lack of real autonomy actually possessed by Kosovo; that is, its 'supervised independence': "Independence on someone else's say so is no independence at all. In other words, the substantial issue at stake here is not Kosovo's independence, but its dependence." (Cunliffe, 2008) Although the ultimate dependency of Kosovo is a crucial point, what is ignored is whether Kosovo had a right to independence in the first place. "Of course the Kosovans have the right to self-determination" writes a commentator "but they certainly won't get it as a Nato colony" (Milne, 2008: 33). But *why* do the Kosovans have the right to self-determination? Why "of course"?

Margalit and Raz, investigating the moral justification for national self-determination, assert that the right to self-government (an entitlement in which the right to self-determination is grounded) is valid when it is held by what they call an 'encompassing group'. Refusing both the terms 'nation' and 'people' for some unclear reason (perhaps precisely because of the difficulty in defining these words) an 'encompassing group' as Margalit and Raz define it, nevertheless sounds remarkably similar to a nation. An encompassing group, explain Margalit and Raz, is a collectivity that possesses a pervasive culture, and is important for its members' self-identification and also, therefore, their welfare: "membership of such groups is of great importance to individual well-being, for it greatly affects one's opportunities, one's ability to engage in the relationships and pursuits marked by the culture". (Margalit and Raz, 1990: 449) It is because these encompassing groups are important for the welfare of the individual, and therefore must be granted the ability to protect themselves, that they have a moral entitlement to self-government. "In our world, encompassing groups that do not enjoy self-government are not infrequently persecuted, despised, or neglected" (Margalit and Raz, 1990: 457).

Their argument is interesting. They offer an explanation of why and how the right to self-government is important for the endurance of collectivities. The argument can also be inverted; for the endurance of collectivities is important for the functioning of self-government and politics in general. As Canovan explains, liberal democracies today depend upon some sort of common bond provided by nationhood. For one thing, there must be a common identification that is strong enough so that decisions made in a democracy are viewed as legitimate and are adhered to. An authoritarian state is not enough for democracy to operate, there also needs to be an un-coerced sense of unity. "Democracy actually has much more stringent requirements in the way of collective identity than more repressive forms of polity" (Canovan, 1998: 21). And Miller, who upholds the nation for its role in securing social justice, points out, "we would expect states that lacked a communitarian background such as nationality provides to be little more than minimal states, providing only basic security to their members". (Miller, 1997: 72). For Miller, "a common sense of nationality is needed to underpin the claim for equal respect". (Miller, 1997: 139)

There is not the space here to analyse these arguments in any depth. The matter that will be focused upon instead is how an 'encompassing group' can be understood. Where, when and how does it exist? Margalit and Raz come up with six characteristics that typify these groups. But, of

course, none of these six characteristics are either necessary or sufficient in describing the sorts of collectivities they are getting at: "While striving to identify the features that matter, we have to recognise that they come in many shapes, in many shades, and in many degrees rife with impurities in their concrete mixing" (Margalit and Raz, 1990: 449). In attempting to untangle one knot, the theorists tie themselves up in others.

Assuming, then, that a nation does have a right to self-determination, what precisely is a 'nation'? When can a nation be said to be a fact of the world, and when is it merely the fantasy of a few extremists or dictators? Who gets to decide? This issue has never been convincingly answered and is no less pertinent today. A nation, as I will go on to explain, should be understood in a particular way. Or, rather, a nation should *not* be understood as having any particular or essential meaning. In other words, the question 'what is a nation?' cannot be answered. Nations cannot be given objective definitions; they cannot be picked out through any defining feature. Yet neither do they exist entirely subjectively. Instead, as objects of identification, they exist somehow between, or beyond, the objective and subjective.

One of the biggest puzzles for politicians, international relations theorists and political philosophers today is that while *objective* features can't be used to determine the existence of a nation, *subjective* definitions are also equally inadequate. On the one hand, every attempt at writing an objective definition fails. Giddens, for example, understands a nation to be: "a collectivity existing within a clearly demarked territory, which is subject to a unitary administration, reflexively monitored both by the internal state apparatus and those of other states" (Giddens, 1985: 116). But of course, not all nations correspond to states. (More often than not, in fact, the boundaries of a nation do not exactly coincide with the borders of a state.) It is often precisely when nations do not correspond to states that problems arise, highlighting the difficulty of definition. For Connor, a nation is "a group of people who feel they are ancestrally related" (Connor, 1994: 202). But some nations incorporate different ethnicities and backgrounds. And is a sense of common ancestry enough to underpin the existence of nation? These are just a few of the many futile past efforts at objective definition. As Renan noted as early as 1882, although ethnicity, language, religion and territory are common 'markers' of a nation, there is not *one* feature that can define a nation. "How is it that Switzerland, which has three languages, two religions, and three or four races, is a nation, when Tuscany, which is so homogeneous, is not one?" (Renan, 1990: 12). Any objective description is always too narrow to capture the varied spectrum of nations in the world. For Renan, therefore, a nation was engendered through the solidarity of the people, and their sense of a shared past and future. "A nation is... a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future..." (Renan, 1990: 19). Renan called the nation a 'daily plebiscite'; something continually agreed upon by its people. Without this constant re-establishment the nation would not exist, and would never have existed. Nations do not exist *objectively* but are formed by the *subjective* agreement of their people, the "fusion of their component populations" (Renan, 1990: 10).

On the other hand, however, a subjective definition is rather too ephemeral, opening the category wide for exploitation. Hobsbawm explains the difficulties that arise with a fully *subjective* definition of nation:

defining a nation by its members' consciousness of belonging to... can lead the incautious into extremes of voluntarism which suggest that all that is needed to be or to create or recreate a nation is the will to be one: if enough inhabitants of the Isle of Wight wanted to be a Wightian nation, there would be one (Hobsbawm, 1992: 7).

To suggest that a few individuals can freely conjure up a nation when and where, and as and how they wish, will not do.

Is there a solution to this puzzle? Is the nation an optical illusion; a trick of the light where an ostensibly solid object disappears whenever it is looked at directly? Can we fit together the different parts of the nations meaning to render a clear picture? I suggest here that the puzzle cannot be *solved*, but it can be *dissolved*; this very question of the nation's 'real' or 'essential' meaning can be rendered pointless. This dissolution of the problem occurs when we consider it from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

Dissolving the Problem

How do I know that the chair I'm sitting on, say, really is a *chair*? How do we know that the tree outside the window is truly a *tree*? Is there a Platonic ideal form of 'chair' with which all material chairs can be compared? Do all chairs share certain features? But some chairs have four legs and two arms, others no legs and no arms. Some are made of wood, others plastic, and some are carved out of stone. And while most chairs are used to sit in, does sitting in something make it a chair? We can sit in trees too. We must acknowledge that there is no perfect example of a chair, no essence of '*chair-ness*'. Instead, to borrow a concept of Wittgenstein's, chairs can be understood to share a set of 'family resemblances': "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and cross-crossing" (Wittgenstein, 2001: no.66, p.27e). Members of a family resemble each other in various ways; some may have an unusually large nose, some may have a bad temper, and others six toes, but there is not *one* feature they *all* have in common. Similarly, although chairs may have certain commonalities, there is not one essential characteristic that they all share. How, then, do we know if something is a chair or not?

What Wittgenstein attempts to do in his later philosophy is explain that our words gain meaning not by referring to any objective feature of the world, but through their use in particular practical situations, or 'language games'. The word 'tree' gains its meaning when it is used in a practical context. This means that there is no fixed or given definition of 'tree'. I can research my family tree, and I can climb my family's tree; the word 'tree' has different meanings in these contexts, yet neither meaning is wrong. This lack of essential meaning does not, however, mean that we can use words in whichever way we like. There are *rules* to the use of our words. If I asked you if you would like a chair in your tea, or whether you'd had a nice chair, you would not understand what I meant. The word

'chair' would have here no *meaning* whatsoever. For a word to be used meaningfully, it must be used according to certain rules. But we cannot simply compile these rules into a rule-book, because there is nothing in a rule itself that tells us how to interpret it. "A rule stands there like a sign-post. Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go?" (Wittgenstein, 2001: no.85, p.34e). How we use a sign-post depends on how we have learnt to use it, not something in the sign-post itself. "A person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom" (Wittgenstein, 2001: no.198, p.68e). A rule is not written 'in the world' but is rather underpinned by social conventions. Hence a rule is not fixed; the rules as to how a word is used may at any point be broken, and sometimes the breaking becomes the rule.

These rules constitute the 'grammar' which governs the way we communicate using words and gestures. In his exploration of Wittgenstein's work, Cavell considers the concept of grammar, observing that we understand the different statements 'feed the monkey' and 'feed the meter' and 'feed his pride' because these ways of using the word 'feed' are part of its grammar. But can we never understand *new* uses of the word 'feed'? Grammar, explains Cavell, can be tolerant; it allows *some* 'projections' to occur. However, this tolerance has limits. And so we can understand, in the right context, a statement such as 'feed the world', but we would probably not understand the statement 'feed the moon'. The rules of the grammar of 'feed' do *not* allow that sentence: "you can not feed a monkey by stuffing pennies in its mouth, and if you mash peanuts into a coin slot you won't be feeding the meter" (Cavell, 1999: 183).

My contention here is that a Wittgensteinian approach can help us understand the existence of nations. For it reveals that a nation isn't simply 'given' in the world; there is no necessary causal antecedent, nor any essential attribute by which we can spot a nation. And yet, although 'nations' don't exist objectively, nor are they purely subjective; they are not conjured up on a whim. There are rules of grammar that govern their existence. In our shared grammar today, Peru, Poland and Portugal exist as nations. But 'the Isle of Wight', 'Kensington', and 'tennis players' do not. There simply could not exist a Wightian nation, a Kensington nation, or a nation of tennis players, for our grammar would require a substantial alteration to tolerate these uses of the word nation. But the rules, of course, are not fully fixed. There is no Wightian nation today, but there might be tomorrow. Nations can emerge, disappear or transform, according to the shifting grammar that alters to fit our shifting forms of life.

Other accounts expose just as clearly the social construction of the nation. We could equally turn to Foucault and his notion of discourse, perhaps, to explain that the existence of a nation arises socially and contingently. But the Wittgenstein account also emphasises that the solidity and salience of a word such as nation arises from its multiplicity of meanings; from the variety of language games in which it is used. Rather than one essential meaning, a word has a collection of overlapping meanings, like interwoven threads: "Why do we call something a 'number'?... we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres". (Wittgenstein, 2001: no.67, p.28e). Nations, I believe, like numbers, contain twisted fibres of meaning. The reason that a nation possesses its apparent solidity is because of the very multiplicity and diversity of these fibres. Ireland, Israel and Iceland are sturdy social entities not because of any

historical longevity or essential feature, but because they are used in a diversity of different everyday language games, and have a collection of different meanings. Although it is clear that nations are socially constructed, it is because they do not appear so that they continue to be identified with. Objects of identification must appear to be given and inescapable, and yet are nothing of the sort.

A nation is not etched into some primordial fabric of the world, it is born within social language games; contingent yet consistent; constituted over and over again through our everyday activities. If there is no shared grammar that underpins the existence of a nation - locating it within a common territory, language, ethnicity, value or some other feature - the nation does not exist. Thus, to determine a nation's existence we should not look at its objective features but at the language games – the rule-governed, social contexts – in which it is used. We *cannot*, it turns out, define a nation. But this is actually irrelevant. The putative problem of whether to define nations objectively or subjectively is revealed to not be a real problem at all; it is rather only a phantom quandary that arises when analysts remove themselves from language games of the everyday. The problem dissolves.

Is it as easy as this? Do we just simply remind ourselves to stop and check our grammar and our language games before ratifying a nation-state? *Whose* grammar and whose language games are we considering here? For there are no global rules of grammar that everyone knows and every nation shares. Don't we need to stop and check the grammar and language games of the population whose nationhood is at issue? But how do we do that if we don't share these language games? Aren't we back at the point where we started, unable to spot a nation without an objective definition? It is important to recognise that language games do not abruptly stop at national borders. It is possible to *understand* others' language games and others' identifications. We can grasp the existence of others 'we' even if they don't use their 'we' as we use ours. No two nations involve the same characteristics; each and every nation has a different meaning. But this does not mean that 'other' nations - nations that we don't identify with - are totally alien to 'us'.

Is 'Kosovo', then, a 'nation', a 'people', an 'encompassing group'? Does it exist as a nation in the language games of those who are supposed to belong to it? Does it exist as an ostensibly solid object that, though not wholly objective is not utterly subjective either? Or is it a nation for only a tiny power-hungry minority who manipulate and distort the set of language games used by the wider population? Whether Kosovo can make a legitimate demand for sovereignty is a clearly political question with no easy answer, but its existence as a nation or not has at least some relevance, and Wittgenstein shows us how and where to look for its existence.

Using the Wittgensteinian Approach

This approach, I suggest, can augment an account of international conflicts. For problems arise of course when the meanings of different nations clash and compete. South Ossetia, for example, is wrenched apart by two uses of the word 'nation'. We can understand the recent conflict in these terms. Georgia sees South Ossetia as part of its *territory*, and the president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, has promised the re-establishment of its territorial integrity (De Waal, 2008). Russia, defining itself partly through *ethnicity*, incorporates two thirds of the population of Ossetia as 'ethnic

Russians'. Georgia and Russia, as nations, have different meanings that both encompass elements of South Ossetia. But what are the meanings of South Ossetia itself? What are the language games used by the South Ossetians themselves? Is South Ossetia used territorially, ethnically or in some other way?

In addition, as exposed by the fact that 'South Ossetia' might well be used in various ways, no particular nation ever has one single meaning. Every nation has a myriad of meanings, a mass of different uses. A Jewish pensioner living in Cornwall and a Christian poet living in Cumbria might use and understand 'England' very differently. The two uses of the word 'England' may have little resemblance - they may even completely contradict each other - and yet neither is mistaken or invalid. As soon as any definition of 'England' is articulated it shows its insufficiency. The only certain commonality to all the different and contradictory understandings of 'England', 'Ossetia', or any other nation, is the name of that particular nation.

The Wittgensteinian perspective, I believe, allows us to understand many of the clashes between and within nations. They often occur not because one nation or party is wrong, or defines itself falsely, but because its meaning conflicts with another. Nations are not uniform blocks of colour, but rather are a mixture of confusing shapes and clashing hues. Even the most settled, the most apparently uncontroversial nations contain conflict over their own meaning.

Although these conflicts, then, are unavoidable, this is not to suggest that there is nothing that can be done to contain or reduce the violence that they can easily ignite. Rather than using the Wittgenstein perspective to *excuse* belligerent reactions to clashes in meaning we can use it to help *alleviate* such belligerence. For this perspective reveals that not only must we acknowledge the inevitability of contradictions in the meaning of a nation, but that we should regard these contradictions as actually integral to a nation's continuance and salience. For it is the ongoing shifts in the meaning of a nation that allows it to stay remain relevant within a form of life that never stands still. Our aim should be to expect, allow and actually celebrate the change in the meaning of a nation, and see that while no nation is immune from potential clashes, the lack of any fixed meaning precludes the permanent exclusion of a static 'other'. In this way the Wittgenstein perspective can help stem the explosion or implosion of the nation in aggression, exclusion and violence.

This paper has suggested that something that must be considered when determining the legitimacy of a demand for self-determination is whether the demand comes from a 'nation' or not. My argument is not that being a nation is sufficient to make a demand for independence valid. Nor is it that a sovereign state is *only* legitimate if it corresponds to a nation, for many legitimate states contain more than one nation, and many nations transcend state borders. It is simply that, today, a call for independent statehood is more compelling if it comes from a group that calls itself a nation; a group that cannot be defined through any objective feature but that is also not utterly subjective. Nation-ness gives a solidity and unity to a collectivity, without which self-government becomes more difficult. Understanding nations from the Wittgensteinian perspective allows us to comprehend nations' apparently puzzling existence and the conflicts that may arise through a clash in their meanings.

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