

History in the service of ideology

Review of The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism, by Adrian Hastings

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The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism, by Adrian Hastings, Cambridge University Press 1997

In the run-up to the first elections to the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly, the nature of Englishness has become a running theme in the press and on television. A discernible current of English nationalism, as opposed to British nationalism, is beginning to be advanced in the media. A myth is being created of an ancient English identity, and an English nation-state of such great antiquity that the forces of a globally integrated world economy cannot threaten it, whether they come from the European Union or inside the United Kingdom.

That process began some years ago among historians. It took the form of a debate between "modernists" and "primordialists". The modernists argue that the nation-state is a recent development and the product of specific conditions in modern society. The primordialists have countered this by arguing that the nation-state originates in medieval or even ancient times. Adrian Hastings, Emeritus Professor of Theology at Leeds University and author of numerous works on the history of Christianity, is a primordialist of the medieval variety.

His book *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* is based on his 1996 Wiles Lectures, which were an attempt to refute Eric Hobsbawm's Wiles Lectures of 1985. In his lectures, published as *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* [1], Hobsbawm's book was neither original in its central thesis nor specifically Marxist. He had done little more than summarise what was then the consensus among historians that nation-states had emerged in the course of the eighteenth century and that nationalism was the product of nation-states, rather than nation-states being the product of nationalism. Hastings' lectures 10 years later, with their challenge to this consensus, reflected a growing trend towards revising the history of the nation-state and rooting it in the deep past so that nationalism could be regarded as one of the most elemental of human drives and far more important than class struggles in shaping history.

This revisionist thesis cannot be put forward without doing considerable violence to the historical evidence, but Hastings' book has become established as a set text on history courses dealing with the rise of the nation-state. Under the pretence of a debate between rival and equally valid theories, nationalist myth-making has been smuggled into the universities.

Hastings contends, "Nationalism owes much to religion, to Christianity in particular. Nations developed ... out of a typical medieval and early modern experience of the multiplication of vernacular literatures and of state systems around them, a multiplication largely dependent upon the church, its scriptures and its clergy. Nation-formation and nationalism have in themselves almost nothing to do with modernity. Only when modernisation was itself already in the air did they almost accidentally become part of it, particularly from the eighteenth century when the

political and economic success of England made it a model to imitate. But nations could occur in states as unmodern as Ethiopia or Armenia and fail to happen in Renaissance Italy or even Frederick the Great's Prussia" (page 205).

Ethiopia and Armenia are thrown in as red herrings. Hastings never considers the history of these countries in detail. His real target is England. According to Hastings, England alone in Europe could claim to be a nation-state by 1066. He traces the origins of this unique status back into the reign of King Alfred of Wessex in the ninth century and suggests that its origins can be found in the eighth century when Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Hastings writes, "The elements then are already there with Alfred--national language, national literature, national law and that element of horizontality suggested by the characteristically Saxon institution, the Witan" (page 39). Anglo-Saxons already had a sense of English patriotism, he claims, citing as evidence a tenth century poem, the *Battle of Maldon*, which "was surely an appeal for the nation to stand firm against invasion" (page 42). By 1066 England had all the attributes of a nation-state: "The benefits of a defined territoriality, the politically unifying impact of ecclesiastical unity, the contribution of two geniuses Bede and Alfred, the stabilising of an intellectual and linguistic world through a thriving vernacular literature, the growth of the economy and of an effective professional royal bureaucracy, all these are attributable to a firmly affirmative answer to 'Was England a nation-state in 1066?'" (page 43)

From this early beginning the English nation-state developed rapidly, according to Hastings. By the thirteenth century, "It is not fanciful to locate Magna Carta near the heart of the political development of England as a mature nation-state [in its] crucial stress of the non-baronial 'free man' something unparalleled in contemporary continental documents.... In a very real way parliament grew naturally and inevitably out of the political ethos generated by the Charter, and when in the seventeenth century it appealed against the king to 'the fundamental law of the kingdom' it was doing little more than explicate in altered circumstances the underlying principle of the Great Charter" (page 50).

This was an incremental development from which there was no turning back. By the late fourteenth century "the English nation-state had gelled so decisively that no imaginable circumstance could later have diverted English society into some quite other form" (page 51).

It is true that the Anglo-Saxons had a common written language which linguists refer to as Old English. Its relationship to Modern English is, however, a distant one, as a brief quote from the *Battle of Maldon* will demonstrate:

Hige sceal þe heardra heorte be centre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlad

A modern English speaker, even one accustomed to Shakespeare and Chaucer, could be forgiven for not understanding these lines, because Old

English is as incomprehensible to a Modern English speaker as it is unpronounceable. In translation the lines read:

Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce
courage the greater, as our strength diminishes

They are stirring sentiments, but, even if proclaimed in a Churchillian drawl, say nothing about national loyalty, patriotism or even national consciousness. The poem is as foreign to us in content as it is in its language. It concerns a minor skirmish with Viking raiders in Essex in 991 in which Byrhtnoth the ealdorman of Essex was killed. On seeing their leader fall some of his men fled, but others fought on to avenge the death of their lord. Byrhtnoth's warriors are motivated by love of glory and love for him, not by love of their country. The greatest shame for an Anglo-Saxon warrior was to leave the battlefield alive after his lord had been killed. Other Old English poems reflect exactly the same ethos. This was no doubt a virtue more common in poetry than in real life, but had a sense of patriotism existed then poets would have exhorted men to give their lives for their country rather than the lord who had given them gifts of rings, horses and weapons. Those whose deaths the Maldon poet recorded were not Englishmen, but Mercians, Northumbrians and East Saxons, even though the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been united under one ruler for almost a century.

Hastings argues that this united Anglo-Saxon kingdom was a nation-state because it had, in addition to its common language and literature, a body of national law. Certainly, its kings had written law codes prepared, but this is also true of other early medieval kingdoms. When we look at the character of early English laws, we see how far away Anglo-Saxon England was from being a nation-state. Large areas of what we would regard as criminal law were outside the authority of the state and remained the concern of the kin group, or extended family as in a pre-state society. In a case of homicide, for example, the relations of the dead person might quite legally pursue a feud or, if they wished, settle for compensation. It is difficult to imagine even the most ardent free market theorist accepting such a drastic pruning of the role of the state. A state with such limited responsibilities is certainly not a nation-state, and indeed is hardly a state at all.

The legislative role of the king was to set down the customary rate at which compensation should be paid, which ranged from 1,200 shillings for a *gesithcund man* (a member of the king's body guard) to 200 shillings for a *ceorl* (a peasant). The different values put on the lives of men indicate a very fundamental way in which Anglo-Saxon society differs from that of the nation-state. Its members are not, even in a theoretical and legal sense, equal. In identifying Anglo-Saxon England as a nation-state, Hastings makes much of its "horizontality", a term he borrows from Benedict Anderson, for whom the "nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" [2]. But for such horizontality to take hold of the imagination, equality must at least be an aspiration. Hastings considers that the Witan is evidence of horizontality as though it were a national representative body that the king must consult. In fact the Witan is a shadowy body, which does not seem to have had any formal structure, composition or area of responsibility, but simply consisted of the leading clerical and lay figures who happened to be at the king's court when he was conducting business and might be called upon to witness a document or give their opinion. It was certainly not the forerunner of parliament or in any sense a representative institution.

Hastings' contention that Christianity was central to the emergence of the nation-state in England would have surprised the early missionaries. They came to Anglo-Saxon England to win a former Roman province back from the pagan barbarism into which it had sunk after the collapse of the Roman Empire, not to build a nation-state. The church had developed within the Roman Empire. It had assumed many of the responsibilities of civil administration as the empire had broken down in the west. Consequently, the political conceptions of its leaders reflected this

imperial past and profoundly influenced the kings of barbarian Europe. The church played an important role in the emergence of early medieval kingship, but this was not due to any particular magic in Christianity. The most critical factor was the church's role as a great landowner. Its institutional continuity and greater organisational sophistication enabled it to formulate a system of granting land in return for definite services. This ultimately evolved into feudalism, with the king at the apex of the social order. This development was already taking place in England before the Norman Conquest.

The feudal state that resulted was entirely distinct from the nation-state. For most of its medieval history, the kingdom of England was a small part of a typically heterogeneous feudal state made up of large tracts of what is now France. The first language of its kings was French and the language of religion was Latin. A common vernacular literature did not emerge until the fourteenth century, when its best known exponent is Geoffrey Chaucer who wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. What is more, unlike the nation-state, the feudal state did not enjoy a monopoly of territorial sovereignty. Subjects of the English king paid taxes not only to their monarch, but also to the Pope in the form of the annates. The papal court dealt with appointments to church posts and, as Henry VIII knew to his cost, matrimonial cases. Even after Henry VIII had broken the link with Rome, church courts continued to rule in matrimonial cases and had greater authority over inheritance than anywhere in Western Europe.

Quite apart from the authority of its own courts, the church exercised jurisdiction as one of the greatest manorial lords. Secular lords had exactly the same power to exact justice on their own manors. A manorial lord was like a sovereign over his subjects. The lives of the majority of the population were more profoundly affected by the manorial courts than they were by the king's justice. The feudal system divided England into an intricate patchwork of private jurisdictions. One half of a village might be under the jurisdiction of one manorial court, while the other half was under that of another. There was in addition the large area of the Welsh March which was ruled by the Marcher lord and in which English common law and the King's writ had no authority.

In no sense was the territorial integrity of England fixed immutably by the late fourteenth century, as Hastings suggests. It was chance and the fortunes of battle that kept England a united kingdom when in 1405 Owain Glynn Dwr formed an alliance with Percy and Mortimer to overthrow Henry IV and divide the English kingdom into three. Percy was to get central and northern England, Mortimer the south and Glynn Dwr Wales with five English border counties. Their rising failed, but had it succeeded the subsequent development of these three separate entities would have been very different from that of the unified kingdom.

Despite these fundamental differences between the feudal state and the nation-state, there is a large measure of continuity in English law, because medieval enactments were never replaced by a modern law code or a written constitution as they were in other countries. Hastings rather cynically uses this element of continuity to introduce confusion when he suggests that the Magna Carta, signed in 1215, is the product of a mature nation-state. Nine chapters of the Magna Carta remain on the statute book today. Some of them are of no more than curiosity value, such as the ban on fish weirs on the River Thames, but others have had a significant political importance such as chapter 39 which states:

"No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or disseised [dispossessed of estate] or outlawed or exiled or in any way ruined, nor will we go or send against him, except by the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land."

Chapter 39 appears to be a statement of the essential liberty of the subject. Certainly that was how the clause was used in the political disputes of the seventeenth century, as the Magna Carta took on a mythic significance which has continued even into the twentieth century. In the context of the thirteenth century, however, its implications were quite

different. While "free man" in a modern context is a general and inclusive term, in the thirteenth century it identified a discrete group, since the mass of the population were not free, but serfs. In the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries English feudal lords managed to make the formerly free villeins into serfs who were not free to leave, buy or sell their land, who had to pay a fine when they married or inherited a tenancy, had to work their lord's land, grind their corn in his mill and bake their bread in his oven. Nor were those members of feudal society who were free able to enjoy the liberties that are associated with freedom in modern society. To modern ears the term "free" has definite connotations of political, social and economic liberty, but in the thirteenth century a free man did not even have freedom to marry without the consent of his feudal superior.

As the Magna Carta and similar documents from the continent show, medieval law had a conception of rights, but it was quite different from the conception of rights that is contained in the law codes of modern nation-states, whose citizens are, at least in theory, equal in a political and legal sense, if not economically. Under feudal law it was not equality that was considered just, but inequality. The rights possessed by each member of the community were not those of individuals but those that pertained to ranked estates which were, as everyone knew, ordained by God. In the feudal order the rights of a baron were greater than those of a villein. The peasants who revolted in 1381 demanded the end of serfdom and took as their slogan:

"When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman"

This was not, however, the spirit that animated the Magna Carta or any other aspect of medieval English law.

Shakespeare's plays have accustomed to us to hear Englishmen, kings and commoners, speak of England with affection and loyalty. There is no reason to suppose that he was guilty of too gross an anachronism in putting such words into the mouths his characters. The Hundred Years War (1338-1453) had the effect of developing an awareness of common interests, language and customs on both sides of the Channel, but that does not equate with nationalism in the modern sense or lead to the creation of a nation-state.

The social system that existed in the late medieval period in which Shakespeare set his historical plays is often referred to as "bastard feudalism". Feudalism was in crisis in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for reasons that are complex, but which in the final analysis were due to the increasing importance of the market and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Lords no longer drew directly on their estates for manpower in war, but maintained private armies of paid retainers. The feudal dues of the peasants were increasingly turned into cash payments as the market economy became more important for all social classes. Although the peasants revolt of 1381 was brutally suppressed, peasants were able to use the acute labour shortage after the Black Death killed an estimated third of the population in the mid-fourteenth century to win concessions and greater freedom. What resulted was not a nation-state, but the more powerful Tudor monarchy. In many ways what is remarkable about the nation-state in England is just how long it took to develop. Capitalist property relations had permeated feudal society for centuries before a decisive clash came in the seventeenth century. Even then the construction of a nation-state was a slow and piecemeal business. The nation-state took so long to make because it did not spring ready made out of the mind of some Anglo-Saxon genius like Bede or Alfred, as Hastings would have us believe, but was constructed in the course of protracted class struggles and revolutionary upheavals.

A word that frequently crops up in Hastings' book is "natural". The whole process of nation-state formation is presented as being "natural". According to Hastings, "ethnicities turn naturally into nations". If history were a natural process, not only would historians be out of work, but history itself would not be made by men and women. It would become

History with a capital H; an elemental force that shapes the fate of human beings. This is a very primitive conception. To find it in a book written by a professional historian, who gave it as his considered opinion in a prestigious series of lectures in front of other professional historians, suggests a serious decline in the quality of history being practised in British universities.

Hastings' view of history as a "natural" process extends to his conception of the state. Throughout his book, Hastings obscures the difference between nations and nation-states. It is an obvious enough distinction since there have been many identifiable nations in the course of human history, but very few of them had states and fewer still nation-states. With Hastings, the state becomes a natural outgrowth of the nation rather than the expression of the specific social relations within a given society and representative of definite class interests. Whether a primitive state in a society just emerging from the European Dark Age, a feudal state, or a modern capitalist state, the state is all one to Hastings. This is an attempt to divorce the nation-state from the historical struggles against feudal privilege and inequality that brought it into being. In England, the United States of America and France a succession of revolutions established the essential character of the nation-state with ever greater precision.

Central to each revolution was the conception of equality and individual rights. While in the English revolution this was never expressed in a rounded theoretical form until after the event, the American and French revolutions based themselves with increasing confidence on the principle of the universal rights of man. The states that emerged were different from anything that had gone before. Even in England, where the most conservative of the revolutions took place, the execution of the king horrified contemporary Europe and exercised a restraining influence over all subsequent English monarchs, so that the restored Stuarts were never able to establish absolute power in the way that continental rulers did. Before January 1649 everyone had known that there was a divinely ordained link between the rightful king and his kingdom. To murder a king was to risk disturbing not just the body politic, but the natural order--strange portents would be seen, ghosts would walk, the earth would open up and people would go mad. After Charles I had gone to the block, no king could sit easy on his throne. So they built around themselves elaborate structures like Louis XIV's Versailles, in which every detail and gesture were designed to reinforce the inequality of society and to hammer home the point that the monarch was the state.

The nation-state did not live up to the ideals of the revolutions that produced it because the state could not go beyond the social relations that existed in society at the time--and those were capitalist relations based on private property. Already in the English revolution this basic contradiction had been recognised in the course of the Putney debates, but it could never be resolved even though later revolutions might find more radical forms of compromise. Nonetheless, the revolutionary struggles from which the nation-state was born left an important legacy which was to find expression ultimately in socialism, which transcends the nation-state system.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries even the most conservative of English historians represented the history of England as an uninterrupted and uniquely blessed movement to greater liberty and equality, even if they thought it had attained a sufficient degree of both to need no further alteration. This is known as the Whig interpretation of history. Hastings presents us with a revised version of the Whig interpretation of history in which English history, while still uniquely marked out and blessed, was never marching toward liberty and equality, but had already achieved all the liberty and equality it would ever need by 1215. Historians reflect the attitudes of their time and social class. Hastings reflects the attitude of a class that wants to defend present inequality, which, when the development of society's productive capacity

is taken into account, has surpassed, on a global scale, all the inequalities that were known in previous centuries. He has manufactured a version of English history whose only purpose is to legitimise the erosion of political rights and social conditions that has taken place in the last quarter of a century. This is not just bad history. It is an inexcusable attempt to pass ideology off as history. The historian Renan once said, "Getting history wrong is part of being a nation," but the whole of being a historian consists in at least attempting to get the history right.

Notes

1.Nations and Nationalism since 1780, E.J. Hobsbawm, Cambridge University Press: 1992

2. Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson, Verso, 1983, page 7



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