

Pierre Manent

What Is a Nation?

The question in my title is rarely posed, and generally speaking, we are not keen to ask this kind of question. We do not spontaneously ask *what* a thing is, but we freely expatiate on how good or how bad it is. This is especially the case when addressing political things. Sometimes the nation is considered as a good thing, perhaps even the best human thing; sometimes the nation is considered as a bad thing, perhaps even the worst political thing. In either case there is not much motivation to explore the *what*—the nature—of the nation.

In my country, the question was asked and answered in 1882 by Ernest Renan in a way that made his answer determinative for modern French self-consciousness (see his famous lecture of that year titled “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”). This was a time when the nation was considered the ultimate form of political life, and thus it was not very propitious for a serious study of its nature. But the French nation had just suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Prussia, and as a consequence the German empire had just been founded. So the strong, indeed enthusiastic general adhesion to the nation as such was mitigated by the despondency and anxiety of this particular nation at this particular juncture. There was an opening for the mind. In his 1882 lecture, Renan formulated in a scholarly and mod-

erate tone the views he had expressed more pungently in letters written to David Friedrich Strauss during and immediately after the Franco-Prussian War.

Renan contrasted the French and German ideas of the nation, the latter resting on the brute facts of race and language, the former on the free will of particular populations. The existence of the nation is then compared to *un plébiscite de tous les jours*, “a daily plebiscite.” While striking, this stark opposition fails completely to convince. However sympathetic we are today to Renan’s thesis, we cannot fail to notice that for a nation to exist it needs the “German” no less than the “French” element. However “open” a nation may be, as the word “nation” itself suggests it is first of all defined by her “children” being born on her soil:¹ a nation is first of all a motherland, or a *Vaterland*, a *patrie*. The specific work of the nation is to join and as it were to fuse the brute fact of birth with the free adhesion of the heart and mind. Renan would not deny that, but his defining the nation by merely opposing two different conceptions of it was far from sufficient if we intend to grasp firmly *what it is*.

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That was a long time ago. We no longer think, as Renan and his contemporaries did, that the nation is the most perfect form of human association. For the last half-century in Europe we have even been engaged in a huge enterprise implicitly or even deliberately aimed at the definitive overcoming of our European nations. After three Franco-German wars, two of which have engulfed the world, it seems we have no more use for the French than for the German idea of the nation. But then it would seem a good time for the philosophic bird to again take flight: the nation has become all that it could be, so we are in a position to finally grasp what it is. Alas, the conviction that the nation is the main culprit in the catastrophes of the twentieth century prevents us from seriously trying. Since we are so certain it is bad, why bother to inquire into its nature? Therefore, instead of asking about the *nation*, most political scientists today study *nationalism*, understood as the phenomenon uniquely revelatory of the nation's essence. This procedure is all the more attractive since this noun already includes a judgment and a condemnation. Once we have started on this path, all efforts at an impartial inquiry are fruitless. Of course, one could object that we have no need for impartiality in these matters. What could be the use in our political life for an ample and accurate knowledge of the nation? We are thus tempted to "forget about it."

I do not think that we can indulge in this sort of avoidance or consignment to oblivion. Among the many reasons I could adduce, the following is sufficient. After more than a half-century of trying, the European enterprise, the effort "to construct Europe," has not succeeded in overcoming our old nations. And nobody expects it will succeed any time soon. For all practical purposes, for the foreseeable future the frame of our lives will retain a

national character. Our nations are here to stay for a while longer. To be sure, they are now and will be in the future very different from what they were at the time of Renan and Strauss. But this complex of facts means that an investigation into the nature of the nation is incumbent upon us. Even if we are to live in nations that will be mere shadows of their former selves, we need to know what they were when they really were themselves.

In this way, too, an unexpected and yet reassuring constellation begins to take shape: Europe and its nations appear less and less as opposite and exclusive forms of political association—with the former irresistibly taking the place of the latter; they are interdependent and inseparable modalities of an enormous, still unfinished, and rather mysterious historical phenomenon. In any event the idea is dawning on us that what we call a nation is the political form proper to Europe, since it was produced by a complex of circumstances and purposes exclusive to Europe, and also to its American offspring.

Before the Nation: From the City to Empire

Until now we have stayed among the nations, so to speak, letting ourselves be guided by differences between them, for instance between France and Germany as discussed by Renan. We need to take a step back. As you will soon see, it will of necessity be a major step back.

We need to look at the nation *from the outside*. How can we do that, since we have lived in nations from time immemorial? Thankfully, our Western memory is longer than our respective national memories. At least intellectually, we have access to other political forms which we can press into service for a methodical comparison with the nation. Luckily, the number of political forms is not indefinite. Indeed, it is very small. As far as they interest us politically,

their number is no greater than three. In addition to the nation, and for the purpose of a defining comparison, we need to take into account only two other political forms: the city and the empire.

The city and the empire are the political forms characteristic of Greek and Roman antiquity. So chronologically, and perhaps genetically, they come *before* our nations. This chronological advantage is compounded by a logical advantage: they are easier to define than the nation.

Let us begin with the city. Of the three political forms under consideration, it is the only one of which we can give a complete, and thus a completely satisfactory, definition. The city is particularly susceptible to being defined because it is constituted by its *finis*, by its limits. In Leo Strauss's felicitous formulation, "the *polis* is that complete association which corresponds to the natural range of man's power of knowing and of loving."² In such a definition the *ought* is included in the *is*. Let us listen to the best analyst of the ancient city: "the best defining principle for a city is this: the greatest number of members with a view to self-sufficiency of life that is readily surveyable."³ We need to keep in mind this defining trait of the city: the city is readily surveyable, it is *eusunoptos*.

The empire is less easy to define because in opposition to the city its defining trait is to be limitless. Far from being *eusunoptos*, it extends well beyond the horizon. To be grasped it requires the imagination, which it stirs and even inflames. You could retort that with all this indetermination the empire implies a clear definition inasmuch as the notion points toward the all-encompassing gathering of all peoples under one rule, ultimately the gathering of the whole human race under the same rule. The objection is valid, except for the fact that this gathering of all men, contrary to the civic association, is an imagined gathering: the

most extended empires in history have left out big chunks of humanity. Thus, practically speaking the notion of empire is a performative one: it involves the impulse and efforts toward the greatest possible extension of a domination. Aiming ultimately at the humanly impossible gathering of the human race, it therefore tends beyond humanity. Only a super-human ruler would be able to govern the whole human race. The emperor has to have a godly or divine nature.

Empires are able to be found in all parts of the world, in all civilizations. In China, in Africa, in Central America, in ancient and modern Europe—one could go on and on. This is not the case with the city. However *natural* it may be (as Aristotle argued in the *Politics*), the city has fully developed only in the European domain broadly understood, that is, from the Greek *poleis* through the cities of northern Italy and northern Europe to the *townships* of New England discussed by Tocqueville. What I stated earlier is therefore in need of correction. The empire and the city are the political forms characteristic of Greek and Roman antiquity inasmuch as the empires there came after, and in some sense rested upon, a previous civic life. This was not the case with the other empires to which I have alluded.

The articulation of the empire and the city was very different in the case of the Hellenistic empire and that of the Roman empire. However dependent the former was upon the Greek idea of the human species, however dependent Alexander was upon Aristotle, the Macedonian empire superimposed itself on the Greek cities without radically transforming them. In the case of Rome, on the contrary, the empire was born from the city, from the entrails of the city which it eventually tore apart. Although you may have the impression that I have set out to discourse on everything under the sun, I will mostly skip this—

admittedly huge—speck of the Roman empire. Let me briefly sketch what interests me about Rome in this inquiry into the genesis and nature of the nation.

It is worth asking what made Rome so fascinating in the centuries following its demise, since much of what had happened under the name “Rome” had been of unparalleled squalor and ugliness. Different answers are possible and legitimate. I submit this one: Rome fascinates because it underwent the greatest political transformation ever seen. The Greek cities—especially Athens—had of course undergone profound transformations. You could argue that classical political science came into being for the purpose of understanding political change, more precisely the change of regime. But however deep and significant these changes were, they did not touch the political form itself, they did not affect the city as such. Athens submitted to Philip of Macedon while keeping its form as a city. Rome, on the contrary, underwent a complete transformation as a political form; from a city it became an empire, a change of form which also included a change of regime.

What is most fascinating in this fascinating story is the protracted, convulsive, and bloody process of transition between the two forms. A standard and convenient way of shedding light on this process is to understand it as a conflict between two regimes—an aristocratic republic on one hand, an absolute monarchy on the other, these two regimes being embodied by two extraordinary men, Cato and Caesar. However enlightening it may be, this interpretation leaves out much. One can get at its omissions by asking the Plutarchian question, What makes the great men of Rome different from the great men of Greece? In Greece, even in Athens, however willing they were when crossed by their fellow citizens to offer their services to the Great King or to an-

other city, they could not control the forces of the city independently from the regime of the city. In Rome, on the other hand, the energies of the republic detached themselves from the senatorial regime and were, so to speak, at the disposition of the one able to handle them. Think of Caesar’s conquest of the Gauls, which was single-handedly pursued for nearly a decade not only without the approbation but against the mind of the senate. The German historian Christian Meier’s convincing thesis is that the difference between Sulla and Pompey on one hand, and Caesar on the other, lies in the former having some respect for the senatorial regime (if not for the senators themselves: Sulla can be said to have reformed the senatorial regime against the grain of the senate). Caesar, however, felt no less contempt for the regime than for the persons of the senate. Did Caesar deliberately aim at founding another regime, a monarchical one? The question is perhaps moot, and not only because he died before he was forced to show his hand. We get the distinct impression that he simply enacted his sovereignty without bothering to give an account of it.

One of the main causes of the separation of the forces of the city from its regime was the blurring of the difference between inside and outside, between citizen and foreigner. The blurring came to a head in the first century B.C. during the war with the allies about their getting full rights as Roman citizens.⁴ Sulla was the first to enter Rome as a conqueror and to treat his fellow citizens as he would the enemies of Rome. He thus prepared Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon.

The European tradition, even the republican one, did not simply side with the republican killers of Caesar. This was because he did not simply embody monarchy, or despotism, or tyranny, as opposed to a republic or a free regime. His personal, quasi-divine ascendancy paradoxically

rested upon, and brought to ultimate fruition, a “republican” confidence in one’s own forces. Blurring the opposition between republican self-government and monarchical domination, he embodied and brought about the consummation of pagan pride. Among the numerous titles borne by the pope in Rome, none is more beautiful than *servus servorum Dei* (servant of the servants of God). To the titles which have been piled on Caesar’s head, I propose, somewhat belatedly, that we add the following: *Dominus dominorum mundi* (Lord of the lords of the world).

The Church and Europe’s New Political Form

We are a long way from home but we haven’t lost our way. We needed to give a sketch of the ancient pagan dynamism and trajectory, a sketch that provides us the broadest and most direct access to the natural order of political things. During the first centuries of the Christian dispensation and for quite a long time after that, city and empire were the only available political forms. Cities *naturally* grew up, particularly in northern Italy and northern Europe. And the prestige of the Roman Empire was such that in western Europe a Holy Roman German Empire evolved. However, despite this imperial prestige, despite the magnificent flowering of so many cities from Florence through Venice to Köln and Amsterdam, the most significant fact of our history is that Europe did *not* organize itself durably in the form of cities or an empire. It was forced to produce a radically new political form. The way to break the stand-off between city and empire, between Guelphs and Ghibellines, was to invent a political form unknown to the ancients. This was the nation, the European nation, the political form that is so familiar to us.

The ancient, or natural, conflict between city and empire did not issue in the ancient

or natural outcomes, whether the victory of one or a complex equilibrium between the two. The old dynamics no longer ruled, no longer produced the accustomed order or disorder. Why? A third party, but not a political one, had introduced itself, purporting to mediate the tension between city and empire. I am alluding to the Church, of course. The Church is not strictly a political form, but it introduced such a deep reconsideration and recomposition of the human association that it would be prudent to include it among the political forms, if only never to lose sight of the part it played in the constitution of the European political landscape. I have already been brazen enough to give an account of pagan or natural politics in a few pages. I have at my disposal even less space to draw a sketch of the political meaning and effects of the Church. Well, it is too late to bow out now.

In some politically relevant sense, the Church is stronger than either the city or the empire. It is stronger for spiritual reasons that have political consequences. The Church, as a purported perfect society—if you prefer, as an imagined perfect society—undermines the moral conditions of the city and the empire as human associations. Through the specific affect which animates her—that is, through charity—the Church goes deeper than the city and farther than the empire. The mere notion of charity—the love of the neighbor for the love of God—opens up perspectives and possibilities that are enough to reorder the way we look at the human association.

Now, without entering into the question of the virtues and the vices of the Church, it is enough to remark that the Church is not of this world. It is, or in the event was, essentially unable to make charity the animating principle of our political associations. If you don’t believe me, I am sure you will believe Machiavelli, who explained that the Church in Italy was too strongly op-

posed to the profane institutions but too weak to be able to replace them. Here is the heart of the matter. The Church decisively and definitively changed the way Europeans looked at the human association, and thus it decisively and definitively transformed the conditions of their political life, but without ever being in a position to govern them politically. On the hoary subject of the relation between politics and religion in Europe, the most important point, to my mind, is the following one: in the whole course of our history the Church, or Christianity, never governed Europeans *politically*, including during the period when the Roman Church claimed for itself the *plenitudo potestatis*, the plenitude of power. The proposition is familiar to us through the polemical formulations of the modern philosophers, who from Machiavelli through Hobbes to Rousseau affirmed that the political contribution of Christianity is, in Rousseau's formulation, "to make impossible any good political regime in the Christian States." Stripped of its polemical or anti-Christian edge, the proposition is all the more enlightening and true.

The incompatibility between the Church on the one hand and the city and the empire on the other goes both ways. The Church is stronger than either the city or empire because it goes deeper than the city and farther than the empire. Conversely, the city is peculiarly inimical to the Church because of its civic passions, which bend the human heart toward human affairs, while the empire too is inimical to the Church because it entertains universal claims. To summarize: our forebears had at their disposal three modes of human association, three political forms, which could not be reconciled nor made compatible. How did the nation evolve from such a hopeless situation? How did a nation-based order develop from this chaos? I do not underestimate the role of subpolitical factors—of geography, lan-

guages, mores, etc. But they belong to what Aristotle would call "material causes"; as such they do not give access to the form, precisely, of this unprecedented political form. The nation could come into being only through the action of the form itself, of what is the most formal in the form, that is, its unity. The entering wedge of the nation-to-be was the king, the Christian King. The European nation came into being through obedience to the Christian King.

The Christian King

Just as the defects of city and empire in their relation to the Church go both ways, the advantages of the Christian King also go in both directions. He is more acceptable to the Church than either the citizen-body of a city or an emperor. Citizens are carried away by passions that make them forgetful of their souls, while the emperor aims at a *plenitudo potestatis* that necessarily rivals that which is claimed by the Church. In contrast the Christian King bends the will of his subjects toward obedience, thus disposing them to obey the law of God and the injunctions of the Church. At the same time, the extension of his power is confined within the limits of his realm, thus conceding to the Church her exclusive claim to universality. Conversely, this King who in these ways is quite agreeable to the Church is in a position to defend the prerogatives of the secular domain against the encroachments of the Church. He can do so much more efficiently than the republican citizen-body, which is always prone to agitation and disruption by the promises and threats of the Church. He is also more effective than the emperor, whose unwieldy domain is even less susceptible to a rational government. Thus, the Christian King appears as a historical agent of great magnitude. He can cooperate with the apostolic mission of the Church (think of Alexander VI's bull in 1493 giving the Spanish Crown an apostolic mis-

sion in the Indies), while striving mightily to have his government freed as much as possible from the demands of the Church.

I readily admit that, however valid, this short description of the Christian King is very far from giving us a sufficient grasp of the nation of which he was the head. At the very most we have limned a fairly suggestive idea of the formative soul of the European nation. But what of its body? After all, we speak of “political bodies,” not of “political souls.”

However addicted to inference and deduction I may appear, I do not intend to deduce the bodies of the European nations from their kingly souls! Innumerable circumstances, both natural and human, contributed to their extraordinary variety. More importantly, the contingent character of their bodies belongs to their essence: they are a kind of mean between the powerful localism of the city (a Florentine citizen is loath to venture very far from the Ponte Vecchio) and the imperial impulse to look toward the unsubdued regions beyond the horizon (there is always an expedition being prepared against the Parthians).

This does not mean that these bodies were simply divorced from their souls. The latter’s faculties played their roles, including what one may call “the national imagination.” The national imagination has this singular character of being at the same time quite ample and neatly circumscribed, a reflection of which is to be found in our meticulously drawn national boundaries. In this connection I submit this thesis, or rather, this hypothesis. This searching for the mean, this circumscribing of the national imagination, presupposed and built upon Christian affects. Because every human being is my neighbor, charity alleviates the pressure of those naturally close to me while it draws closer those who live faraway; it weakens the grasp of localism while it assuages the vertigo of faraway domination. Again, I am not suggesting

that charity as a theological virtue was directly productive of these political effects, only that the perspective deriving from charity informed the imagination of our forefathers and helped them to discover a middle dimension between the little and the immense, thus preparing their souls for the nation-in-formation.

Although this kind of analysis does not point toward particular events or a neatly determined period, it nevertheless aims to shed some light on the long and confused development during the course of which Christian princes tried to enforce a more and more exact obedience, while the body of their subjects, more and more neatly circumscribed, was feeling its way toward self-awareness: that is, *national* self-awareness.

The Christian Nation and the “Middle Dimension”

Then came the crisis, the contentious joining together of soul and body, of obedience and fellow-feeling. I am referring to the crisis of the Reformation. In the context of these reflections, the Reformation appears as the period of the nationalization of Christianity—or, more precisely, of the national appropriation of Christianity. The translation of the Bible into national languages is the most revealing and effective instrument of this appropriation. The national appropriation of Christianity is necessarily its subjective appropriation. Only through the crystallizing of the nation can Christian liberty coincide with Christian obedience. At that time Christendom was broken apart and the “commonwealth of Christian subjects,” the Christian nation, was born.

The pivotal role of the Christian king shows itself in the fact that he, or indeed she, morphed into, or prepared the way for, or had to make way for, the secular, neutral, or, as Hobbes put it, the “abstract” state. Indeed Hobbes, the most sober, reasonable, and persuasive enemy of the Christian

name in European history, is a credible witness to the truth of the thesis I am trying to defend. He offered to put an end to the disorders consequent on the Reformation by founding a new political form *exclusively* on the heretofore unheard-of basis of the absolute unity of command. He made admirably clear that the solutions deriving from the two great Roman experiences—republican liberty and imperial-Catholic authority—as well as from the evangelical or Protestant confidence in individual grace, made the disease more virulent rather than curing it. Therefore he proposed a science of obedience “built upon sure and clear principles.” He proposed the modern state, for which he drew up the plan. He grasped with perfect clarity that it meant the end of the Church as it had been understood until then. He wrote the following: “And therefore a Church, such a one as is capable to command, to judge, absolve, condemn, or do any other act, is the same thing with a civil Commonwealth, consisting of Christian men; and is called a *civil State*, for that the subjects of it are *men*; and a *Church*, for that the subjects thereof are *Christians*.”⁵ But if Europe was composed of “commonwealths consisting of Christians,” then the sovereign, neutral, abstract state was concretely in need of a Christian commonwealth, also known as a Christian *nation*.

Now if we go back to the point from where we started, we understand that the conjunction of a neutral state and a Christian nation finally solved the “Roman problem,” which had never ceased to be *our* problem. Since the beginning of the first century B.C., the Romans had been torn between the republican city and the monarchical empire, between a rather narrowly limited natural body politic and an enormous, indeed limitless one. That was the problem of political physics we needed to solve without having recourse to the imperial solution that the Christian Church

had robbed of legitimacy. As I have tried to argue, Europeans distributed themselves among a plurality of large but limited political bodies, made possible and in some sense necessary by the pressure of the Christian affirmation.

I need not prolong the story: how, after the Christian king had become the sovereign and neutral state, the national-Christian fellow-feeling became less and less Christian and more and more “purely national”; how the political imagination of most European nations caught fire at the thought of the endless territories beyond the horizon, with their benighted populations waiting to be baptized, civilized, or simply exploited; how, as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, new imperial ideas of class or race superseded the national imaginations. Soon nationalist, or rather imperialist Europe would destroy itself.

And where are we now? We are back to square one, in the sense that we are again confronting the meaning of the European nation *as such*, shorn of its nationalist or imperialist fantasies and pretensions.

More precisely, whether we are French or Germans, Italians or Spaniards, we no longer define ourselves as belonging to Christian nations. We have discarded, or at least greatly curtailed, the claim to national sovereignty; we have even agreed to erase our borders, which were so carefully drawn and passionately defended until not so long ago. And as I speak, uncomfortably set between our rump nations and a half-baked Europe, we are asking ourselves whether to go farther in the direction of a limitless European empire of universal fellow-feeling, or to stop at this point and confront our necessities—or perhaps even to go back a little and try to breathe some new life into our old nations, since we are not sure after all that it is possible or desirable to live a “post-national” life.

Thus we are caught again in the “Roman

syndrome.” We are torn between the opposite directions of the imagination I tried to describe. On one hand we experience the passion for the little platoon, morally much smaller than the ancient city since it is deprived of political self-government, and on the other hand we experience the imperial urge toward what is beyond the horizon, beyond the borders of Europe, however defined. We are fast losing the middle dimension, with its inseparably physical and spiritual aspects, on which we predicated everything worthy of still being cherished in our several national histories as well as in our common European history. In this sense, I think that we are on the verge of self-destruction. To parry this threat, nothing is more important than to get a grip on our centuries-old development, and that means first of all becoming fully aware of the originally Christian character of our nations. As should be clear by now, there is not the slightest suggestion for a rollback of the secular state in this claim; in fact, as I have tried to argue, the neutral state and the Christian nation go hand in hand. Neither am I pleading for some “cultural” transmogrification of religion, some wishy-washy affection for our “roots.” It is not a matter of “remembering our roots”! It is rather a matter of becoming aware of our political genesis and substance.

For the sake of contrast, just imagine what could happen if this middle dimension does not hold. First, Europe would crumble into more and more numerous, and more and more unrelated, segments; second, its allegedly common institutions and its supposedly governing classes would lose themselves in the hollow representation of, and futile aspiration toward, a homogeneous and limitless human world. Our common capacity for human experience and rational response to it would inevitably erode.

To strike the middle ground between the puny and the immense, the petty and the

limitless, is not a matter of individual or even collective capacity or striving. You cannot produce it at will, as you can embark at will on the fabrication of whatever big institutional scheme has caught your imagination. It is a disposition of political things that has come to pass, depending on the “historical contingency” to which I referred earlier. These political bodies—the nations—have nothing natural about them, even though, and I say this on good authority, man is a political animal by nature. These political bodies have resulted from our forebears’ efforts to govern themselves under the unprecedented possibilities and constraints of the Christian dispensation. It is only with the most strenuous exertions that we can become aware again of these possibilities and constraints and of their indirect but no less formative power. Currently, in the best of cases we find our nations to be like boring domestic animals, offering the comfort of their fur against the cold winds of globalization. Thus, they are for us only the puny, and we look with dread toward the immense. In truth, the European nations envelop the puny and the immense because they result from the effort to strike an unprecedented balance between the two, an effort made possible by the Christian affirmation. It is not that we have become too open-minded for our old national selves. It is rather that we are no longer able to grasp or even to feel the strength and delicacy of this balance.

1. “Nation” comes from the Latin *nasci*, which means to be born or generated. (Trans. note.)

2. See *Natural Right and History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) 1974, 254, n.2.

3. See Aristotle’s *Politics*, 1326b, trans. Carnes Lord. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 205.

4. In America this is often called “the Social War” (91–88 B.C.). “Social” comes from the Latin word *socius/socii*, or ally. (Trans. note.)

5. See *Leviathan*, ch. 39, in fine.