

## **Classical sociology and the nation-state: A re-interpretation**

**(To be published at the Journal of Classical Sociology Vol 8 Num 1, 2008)**

**Daniel Chernilo\***

### **Abstract**

This article revisits the claim, largely accepted within the sociological community for over thirty years now, that classical sociologists had no clear concept of the nation-state and thus were unable to conceptualise its rise, main features and further development in modernity. In contradistinction to this standard view, which in current debates receives the name of methodological nationalism, I advance a re-interpretation of classical sociology's conceptualisation of the nation-state that points towards what can be called the *opacity* of its position in modernity. Marx understood the *historical elusiveness* of the nation-state as he believed that it had already passed its heyday as political struggles were fought between Empires and the Commune. Weber captured the *sociological equivocations* that arose from the historical disjuncture between the nation and the state. And Durkheim, finally, tried to come to terms with the nation-state's *normative ambiguity* via the immanent tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The conclusion is that, even if not thoroughly unproblematic, classical sociologists were able to avoid the reification nation-state's position in modernity precisely because they were not obsessed with conceptualising modernity as such from the viewpoint of the nation-state.

Keywords: classical sociology, Durkheim, Marx, methodological nationalism, modernity, nation-state, Weber.

Last revision: 11 January 2007

Word count: 7707

In an influential article published in the pages of the *British Journal of Sociology* in 1983, Anthony D. Smith gave concise expression to an argument that until very recently was still regarded as the definitive assessment of sociology's inability to come to terms with the nation-state's position in modernity. From its inception, Smith argues, sociology would have fallen under the trap of 'methodological nationalism'; the idea that the nation-state was the natural and necessary representation of the modern society. In his view, this theorem would hold true not only for the works of classical sociologists but also for a great deal of twentieth century sociology. In his own words:

It is, therefore, as if its own thoroughly evolutionist background and impetus made sociology, as the study of laws of social order and social change, unable to distance itself sufficiently from its own basic premises, which are also those of nationalism, and from so essential an aspect of the modern laws of change, i.e., the growth of nations. If this is the case, then it would go far in explaining why nations and nationalism were so long accepted as a sociological "given"; and why the study of society was always *ipso facto* the study of the nation, which was never disentangled as separate dimension or issue (...) the difficulty for a discipline so impregnated with the selfsame assumptions as those held by its object of study, to stand back and realize its historical peculiarity, has prevented sociologists till quite recently from devoting the attention to that object which it clearly deserves; with the result that the growth of nations and nation-states, and of their ethnic core from which most sociologists are normally recruited, are topics and features of society 'taken-for-granted'; they are part of the basic furniture of the mind carried as much by students of society as by any other of its members (Smith 1983: 26)

Smith was by no means alone in putting this case forward at the time. Rather, he was giving systematic expression to a number of similar views that had already denounced sociology's excessive reliance on national categories (Giddens 1973, 1985, Martins 1974, Smith 1979). Indeed, this standard view is still shared by many of the leading scholars in different fields of the sociological spectrum. For instance, a similar assessment of classical social theory's self-defeating methodological nationalism has been advanced by a number of scholars doing exceptional research into the rise and recent transformations of nations and nationalism (Mann 1986, 2004,

Wimmer and Schiller 2002); by some of the most interesting and sharp social theorists (Calhoun 1997, Luhmann 1997, Smelser 1997) and indeed by those writers for whom the rise of globalisation means also the decline of the nation-state (Albrow 1996, Bauman 1998, Beck 2000, Castells 1997, Urry 2000).

My starting point in this piece is therefore that for a discipline that is so obsessed with permanently revisiting its own past – and sociology has grown accustomed to disagreeing on pretty much everything in the process – it is rather surprising that this standard view has remained largely unchallenged for over thirty years now. The sociological community became used to the idea that no gains for our substantive comprehension of the nation-state would come from revisiting the works of that generation of social theorists we now treat the founding figures of sociology. But the question of social theory's alleged as well as real methodological nationalism has proved much more complicated than previously granted (Chernilo 2006). And its implications have proved relevant not only for the way in which we currently reconstruct and reassess the past of sociology but more importantly for our substantive comprehension of the nation-state as a modern socio-political arrangement (Chernilo 2007a). The time has come for us to revisit this consensus and, in the spirit of renovating our understanding of *both* the nation-state *and* classical sociology, the aim of this article is to re-interpret the relationship between the two. Because classical sociology was able to grasp the *historical elusiveness* (Marx), *sociological equivocations* (Weber) and *normative ambiguity* (Durkheim) of the nation-state it can now help us understand the *opacity* of the nation-state's position in modernity.

In so far as this article attempts to grasp what previous writers have understood about the nation-state, the questions being raised here belong *also* to the field of intellectual history. Yet, its main thrust remains sociological as the article concentrates on how the past of social theory and of the nation-state helps us make sense of the present transformations of the nation-state and the challenges they pose to social theory. The ultimate *sociological* question I am interested in pursuing is how to comprehend, as best as we possibly can, the history, main features and legacy of the nation-state in modernity.

## **Karl Marx. Understanding the historical elusiveness of the nation-state.**

We may start this reconstruction with the works of the young Karl Marx. In the context of his dispute with the young Hegelians, Marx criticised ‘the fetishism of the state’ which finds in ‘Hegel’s idealism its ultimate expression’ (Fine 2002: 65). Marx argued that Hegel described ‘a particular state of affairs (like hereditary monarchy, a reformed bureaucracy, a bicameral parliament, the incorporation of the judiciary within the executive) and assigned to it the logical attributes of universality. Hegel idealised empirical reality, turning the existing state into the embodiment of the universal’ (Fine 2002: 68-9). The work of Hegel, says Marx (1978b: 59), represents the highest and most profound critique of ‘the modern state and of the reality connected with it’. This critique centres on Hegel because of his role in the idealisation of the Germans’ understanding of the country’s situation

In politics, the Germans have *thought* what other nations have *done* (...) the *status quo* of the *German political system* expresses the *consummation of the ancien régime*, the thorn in the flesh of the modern state, the *status quo* of *German political science* expresses the *imperfection of the modern state* itself, the degeneracy of its flesh (Marx 1978b: 59-60)

Marx criticises this diagnostic of Germany in which the country is taken as self-sufficient and without consideration of broader social processes all over the world. Marx’s critique of Hegel is the critique of turning the project of a German nation-state into a form of religion; Marx’s argument on Germany, as well as his general critique of Hegel’s idea of the state, pointed in the direction of a critique which involved transcending the ‘methodologically nationalistic’ framework and assumptions with which, in his view, Hegel – and German political philosophy in general – endorsed the German state.

Similarly, in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx discusses the limits of what can be achieved in the transformation of social life when the political form of the modern state is taken as the ultimate framework of social and political relations. Marx’s (1978a: 35) argument is that political emancipation is a necessary stepping stone in the process of modern society reaching its own limits: ‘*political* emancipation certainly represents a great progress. It is not, indeed, the final form

of human emancipation, but it is the final form of human emancipation *within* the framework of the prevailing social order'. Whilst the *idea* of political emancipation makes possible the rise of the modern form of socio-political relations – represented in the division between the state and civil society – the *critique* of political emancipation exposes the limitations of these social relations and political order. The ultimate problem with the project of political emancipation is not that it fails to *transcend* the actual form of the state but that it actually *reinforces* that same state by consecrating the separation of civil society from the state.

Marx argues that the political programme that aims at the reform of the modern state within the limits of that state fails to grasp not only its historical and contradictory character but also the ultimate source of alienation and inequality of modern social life. The project of human emancipation is based on the transcendence of the bourgeois state and the contradictory form of reproduction of social life upon which that state is founded: civil society. Rather than saying to the Jews, as Bauer did, 'you cannot be emancipated politically without emancipating yourselves completely from Judaism', Marx (1978a: 40) argues the other way round 'it is because you can be emancipated politically, without renouncing Judaism completely and absolutely, that *political emancipation* itself is not *human* emancipation'. Marx's claim – the argument refers to the Jews but it certainly applies not only to them – is twofold. On the one hand, Marx argues that, even within the framework of the modern (nation) state, political rights should be independent of religious or cultural differences. Marx criticised Bauer on the grounds that he attached the recognition of political rights within the state to the alleged abolition of these differences. On the other hand, Marx realised that the actual result of that 'abolition' can only be the imposition of one privileged national (German) and/or religious (Christian) form of identity upon other minority groups. Marx's critique of political emancipation is in this sense a critique of making the nation the basis for the recognition of political and civil rights within the state (Marx 1978a: 29-30). For Marx, then, the young Hegelians hypostatise the modern nation-state as the most rational form of socio-political life. They take the bourgeois form of the state as something that state is not: the final stage in the historical development of modernity.

Indeed, according to Simon Clarke (1991: 58), a similar argument has been made in relation to Marx's critique of Political Economy: 'Marx's critique of Hegel can be translated immediately

into a critique of political economy because it is a critique of their common ideological foundations'. I have no space to enter into this here in any detail but let me just mention that, in *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973: 172) argues that for the determination of the actual processes of production and exchange, 'individual', 'local', 'national' and 'global' aspects are all to be integrated and taken into account. Marx (1973: 227-8) says that the first section of his proposed study of economic relations '*as relations of production*' must include, first, the study of the 'exchange of the superfluous', second, 'the internal structure of production', third 'the concentration of the whole in the state', fourth 'the international relation'. Finally, at the level of the world market (...) production is posited as a totality together with all its moments, but within which, at the time, all contradictions come into play. The world market then, again, forms the presupposition of the whole as well as its substratum'. Not only in its form but also in its very content, therefore, Marx's critique of *German* political philosophy and *British* political economy can be read as rejection of taking the nation-state as the last development of modern socio-political life in modernity. The strong claim to universalism underlying Marx's historical materialism works as antidote against the reification of the nation-state's position in modernity (Chernilo 2007b).

One can still pursue the argument of the historical elusiveness of the nation-state in Marx's work a bit further. In one well-known formulation of the *Communist Manifesto*, the argument revolves around the tension between nationalisation and cosmopolitisation that capitalism brings with it

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, *all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify*. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind (Marx and Engels 1976: 487, emphasis added)

What immediately precedes and follows this paragraph, it must be remembered, is nothing but Marx's admiration for the way in which the bourgeoisie has led to the rise of a world market, world literature and world-wide means of communication (Berman 1982). In relation to the nation-state, however, it is worth highlighting the fact that Marx is already aware of how *all new*

modern (capitalist) social relations are obsolete before they mature: capitalism forms and erodes the nation-state in equal measure even before it is fully formed. The nation-state is an impossible form of socio-political arrangement because all nations become ‘antiquated’ they can create ‘their own’ states. The contradiction Marx exposes here is that, although the nation-states is a forward-looking project, it is at the same time outdated even before it can actually establish itself in the present.

This interpretation finds further support in Marx’s latter writings. In *The Civil War in France* – originally written in 1870-1 – the nation-state also fails to settle in as the organising centre of modernity and it now disappears behind the struggle between the French Empire and the Commune. It is remarkable how Marx expressed in that text that current political struggles were to be fought between the *Empire* and the *Commune* because it is as though the nation-state had already passed away! On the one hand, Marx presents imperialism as ‘the most prostitute and the ultimate form of State power which nascent middle-class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism’ (Marx 1978c: 631). In the Europe of that time, ‘monarchy’ was just ‘the normal incumbrance and indispensable cloak of class-rule’ (Marx 1978c: 634). On the other hand, Marx (1978c: 631) also argued that, in opposition to the Empire did not stand any form of nation-state; rather ‘[t]he direct antithesis to empire was the Commune’. And in fact, for the middle classes ‘there was but one alternative – the Commune, or the Empire – under whatever form it might reappear’ (Marx 1978c: 636). The nation-state, as a form of political organisation in capitalism, is being formed and dissolved, constituted and pulled apart, in the same process of capitalist development.

Marx regarded the nation-state as one element within a much wider and complex web of modern socio-political relations. His argument is not only that the nation-state needs to be understood within the broader picture of capitalist social relations but also that political relations themselves can take different forms in capitalism such as Empires or the Commune. Yet, Marx did not argue for a contingent link between capitalism and the nation-state either. Rather, he subjected the nation-state to the dialectics of formation and dissolution of social relations with which capitalism has made itself famous. The nation-state is in this sense no different from all other forms of social relations that, in capitalism, *become antiquated before they can ossify*. The nation-

state is being created and dissolved, established and pulled apart in the same way as everything else in capitalism is.

### **Max Weber: Battling with the sociological equivocations of the nation-state.**

Let me continue this exploration into the nation-state's position in modernity with Weber's understanding of the nation-state. Weber's (1994b: 310-1) concept of the state, based as it is on the question of the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence, is very well-known indeed. Much less noticed, however, is the fact that Weber does not conceptualise what is particular of the *modern* state in relation to the monopoly of legitimate violence. Rather, the core of Weber's definition of the modern state is the fact that the state's duties are fulfilled through particular means. Weber understands the modern state within his broader comprehension of the processes of bureaucratisation of modern social life which, in the case of the state, finds expression in the fact that the state's administrative staff is separated from the means with which to fulfil their roles. Thus Weber (1994b: 314-5):

All forms of state order can be divided into two main categories based on different principles. In the first, the staff of men (...) *own* the means of administration *in their own right* (...) In the other case the administrative staff is "separated" from the means of administration, in just the same way as the office-worker or proletarian of today is "separated" from the material means of production within a capitalist enterprise (...) the development of the modern state is set in motion everywhere by a decision of the prince to dispossess the independent, "private" bearers of administrative power who exist along him, that is all those in personal possession of the means of administration and the conduct of war, the organisation of finance and politically deployable goods of all kinds

Weber conceptualises the state with total independence of the nation. Similar to what Marx had done, as we just saw, he locates the idea notion and main features of the modern state within the broader social theory of modernity in which they were ultimately interested. Just as we could not get a sense of Marx' idea of the nation-state beyond an understanding of capitalism's main features, Weber's concept of the state makes little sense beyond his wider view of the

bureaucratisation of modern social life and the tragedy of modern culture (C. Turner 1992). The problem becomes all the more vexing because it is not only that the concept of the state is independent from the nation, but the nation itself is ‘one of the most vexing, since emotionally charged concepts’ to be found in the sociological lexicon (Weber 1978: 395). Above all, Weber was sceptical as to whether the nation could effectively be formalised. ‘If the concept of “nation” can in any way be defined unambiguously’, he says, it can just refer to ‘a specific sentiment of solidarity’ of a certain group of people ‘in the face of other groups’ (Weber 1970: 172).

In trying to explain causally the emergence of nations, Weber says that there is no single factor that can fulfil that role so that no conclusive explanation of their development can be given. He made clear to the reader the substantial problems he faced in framing his inquiry and expanded on the difficulties of grasping what a nation is. He laboriously tried to attach the definition of the nation to other aspects of social life: ‘[t]he concept of “nationality” shares with that of the “people” (*Volk*) – in the “ethnic” sense – the vague connotation that whatever is felt to be distinctively common must derive from common descent (Weber 1978: 395). But this ambiguity is only the beginning of the problem because nations do not have ‘an economic origin’; they are not ‘identical with the “people of a state”’ neither are they ‘identical with a community speaking the same language’ and indeed ‘and one must not conceive of the “nation” as a “culture community”’. Furthermore, ‘a common anthropological type (...) is neither sufficient nor a prerequisite to found a nation (...) “national” affiliation need not be based upon common blood’ so that ‘the sentiment of ethnic solidarity does not by itself make a “nation”’. Finally, in relation to classes, the claim is that an ‘unbroken scale of quite varied and highly changeable attitudes towards the idea of the “nation” is to be found among social strata’ (Weber 1970: 171-8).

The general tone of Weber’s sociological reflections on the nation is above all one of scepticism. The clause with which he begins this discussion states that the nation is ‘located in the field of politics’ only ‘in so far as there is at all a common object lying behind the obviously ambiguous term “nation”’ (Weber 1970: 176). And equally ‘the concept [of the nation] seems to refer – if it refers at all to a uniform phenomenon – to a specific kind of pathos which is linked to the idea of a powerful political community (...) such a state may already exist or it may be desired’ (Weber 1978: 398). Eventually, Weber accepted the association between nations and states only ‘if one

believes that it is at all possible to distinguish national sentiment as something homogeneous and specifically set apart' and, *even if that were the case* 'one must be clearly aware of the fact that sentiments of solidarity, very heterogeneous in both their nature and their origin, are comprised within national sentiments' (Weber 1970: 179). Class structure, power politics, common memories, religion, language and racial features are all only imperfectly associated with the nation and none of them can really give us the just impression of what a nation is and how its association with the state can adequately be conceptualised.

So far we have hardly found any trace of logical necessity in Weber's conceptualisation of the nation. This impression is reinforced at the historical level as we are told that the 'national sentiment is variously related to political associations, and the "idea" of the nation may become antagonistic to the empirical scope of given political associations. This antagonism may lead to quite different results' (Weber 1970: 175). The political expression of national sentiments produces different political results in different groups. Weber refers to how Spaniards, Poles, Croats, Russians and Germans have all had to come to terms with an 'idea of the nation' which is 'entirely ambiguous' for the purposes of sociological generalisation (Weber 1970: 175). Nations want to form powerful states but, if successful, they become victims of their own success: imperialism is the representation of the disintegration of the nation-state because power politics pushes the state *beyond* the limits of the nation. Interestingly, the opposite case is also possible: 'there are cases for which the term nationality does not seem to be quite fitting' and Weber argues that Belgian or Swiss could not be conceived of as nation-states because 'have forsaken power' (Weber 1978: 397). If in the case of imperialism nation-states explode as victims of their own success, in this latter case nation-states implode due to the lack of power and prestige politics that can maintain their own project as independent nation-states. In either case, nation-states are unlikely to survive *qua* nation-states due to either their success or their failure. So, even when Weber recognises that the "nation state" has become conceptually identical with "state" based on common language' he would do so by emphatically stating at the same time that 'in reality, however, such modern nation states exist next to many others that comprise several language groups' (Weber 1978: 395).

The more abstract reflections on nations and nation-states we have just discussed illuminate – and are illuminated by – Weber’s views on the relationships between the ideas of the *Reich* and the *nation-state* in Germany at the turn of the century (Mommsen 1984). Weber was well aware of the ambiguities that underpinned the formation of the *Reich*. It has been argued that, in the Germany of Weber’s time, the *Reich* was neither the same as, nor completely different from, a nation-state. On the one hand, ‘the new *Reich* saw itself as a nation-state’ (Langewiesche 2000: 122). The *Reich* presented itself as a nation-state and developed from an idealised image of how a German nation-state ought to be. On the other hand, however, there seems to have been an equally clear awareness on the fact that the German nation-state was more a project than a reality. The argument was that a nation had not yet been formed the *Reich* ‘did not fully absorb the old imperial nation, and at the same time expanded beyond the ethnic nation’ (Langewiesche 2000: 122). We totally miss Weber’s historical context if we overlook the differences and even tensions between the ideas of the *Reich* and the nation-state and it is only in making this inappropriate move that the foundation of the *Reich* can be taken to mean the foundation of the German nation-state. The situation of Germany at the time seemed to have taught Weber that the ‘German nation-state’ did not exist in actuality and may have not been even desirable at that particular moment. In fact, an Empire was in his view the best political form for Germany at the time (Weber 1994a). A nation-state, then, was a project instead of an already made solution; it was difficult to establish and, more important for my argument here, it was not the only, necessary, or even the best answer for all political struggles. The tension between imperialism and nationalism in Weber’s *political* writings, although very problematic in itself, points *sociologically* in the direction of a critique methodological nationalism.

### **Emile Durkheim: Facing the normative ambiguity of the nation-state.**

The *historical* and *sociological* issues raised respectively by Marx and Weber find *normative* expression in Durkheim’s (1915) *Germany above all*, a little pamphlet that was written to explicate the causes of the First World War to the French public. Durkheim (1915: 44-5) takes the work of Heinrich Treitschke as the ultimate representation of the development of the German mentality in which ‘a morbid hypertrophy of the will’ expresses itself as an ‘attempt to rise “above all human forces” to master them and exercise full and absolute sovereignty over them’. With this,

Durkheim (1915: 4) says, Germany has departed from ‘the great family of civilized peoples’ and therefore it would be not only in France’s interest, but in the interest of civilisation itself, to oppose the expansion of Germany. Durkheim rejected the realist ground on which Treitschke asserted the role of the state –the ‘State is power’ (Durkheim 1915: 19) – as well as the normative consequence Treitschke drew from it: ‘the State is not under the jurisdiction of the moral conscience, and should recognise no law but its own interest’ (Durkheim 1915: 18).

The opposition to Treitschke’s conception of the state was that no genuinely universalistic conception of morality can be grounded on state or national premises. Morality, Durkheim (1915: 23) argues, is based on ‘the realisation of humanity, its liberation from the servitudes that belittle it’. Durkheim (1915: 24) understands that core to the Christian tradition is the fact that ‘there are hardly any great divinities who are not to some extent international’. The religion of humanity in which Durkheim is interested does not fuse with the state nor with the nation. Rather, all efforts must be made to transcend the possible – but by no means inevitable – paradox between a commitment towards human values and patriotism towards one’s own nation.

Durkheim favoured pacifism and internationalism for both sociological and normative arguments. In relation to the former, the industrial revolution played a major role; pacifism has to be pursued in order to avoid the “wasteful” expenditure of war’ (Layne 1973: 99): industrial development, technological improvements and prosperity have arisen together and require the pacific reorganisation of Europe (Durkheim 1959: 130-1). On the normative side, there is here the – Kantian – ‘perpetual-peace’ type of pacifism: ‘the evolution of modern society has produced a wider horizon for human consciousness as human beings become conscious of their involvement in ‘humanity’ on a global scale (...) Durkheim anticipated the idea of political globalization on the basis of a universalistic notion of humanity’ (B. Turner 1992: xxxv). The nation-state should turn away from old tendencies to imperialist expansion and focus on social justice and the full development of its citizens as Durkheim believed in the compatibility between a republican state and international harmony (Jones 2001: 60, 181; Thompson 1982: 153-4). Yet, as we have clearly seen, Durkheim thoroughly supported France’s war effort because these seemed to him the best way of defending these institutions and moral principles.

The question of the balance between the state and the individual is the crucial normative tension in his political sociology. Durkheim's (1973: 54) argument is that the moral authority of the state is based on the individuals' moral autonomy. Individual rights can only arise and be granted by the state: 'the stronger the State, the more the individual is respected' (Durkheim: 1992: 57). The thesis is that there are no natural rights of the individual at the moment of birth but rather that these rights arise and are held only by the state 'our moral individuality, far from being antagonistic to the State, has on the contrary been a product of it (...) the fundamental duty of the State is (...) to persevere in calling the individual to a moral way of life' (Durkheim 1992: 68-9).

Durkheim advocated for a substantive conception of freedom that is rooted in a combination between moral individualism and state republicanism. Durkheim's moral individualism refers to humankind in general, not to the citizens of any specific nation; the state has to respect both the internal morality of the civil society and the external mores of foreign peoples (Giddens 1986: 21-3). France's worth would be based on having adopted these universal values, and not that these values had to be defended because they expressed a particular national character – and neither is the case that the French are the only nation that can represent these values. In a rather paradoxical way, then, the more *politically* nationalistic Durkheim's arguments became, the less *methodologically* nationalistic his sociological insight was. Durkheim came up with a thesis on the *co-originality* between modern 'states' and modern 'individuals' in which the combination of moral and sociological arguments produces an understanding of nation-states that transcends methodological nationalism.

To Durkheim (1992: 72), sentiments towards one's own nation and towards humanity are 'equally high-minded kind of sentiments' and he refers positively to both of them as 'patriotism' and 'world patriotism'. Durkheim also (1964: 33) claimed that our current cosmopolitanism lies precisely in having understood that there is no opposition between the nation and humanity. Yet, competition among states has created and still creates difficulties; the feelings towards one's own nationality and state can enter into conflict with the sentiments towards the human species as such. Durkheim's crucial argument, however, is that there is no automatic opposition between nationalism and internationalism: 'neither anti-patriotism nor nationalism are defensible

positions' (Durkheim quoted in Layne 1973: 101). Pacifism will only be achieved through an equilibrated relation between both the *patrie* and internationalism. He rejected the notion of a community of culture or an ethnic principle in the constitution of the nation; the question was to avoid chauvinism and to stay away from the doctrine of aggressiveness among states: 'national exclusivism has to be excised from patriotism' (Llobera 1994: 152). A *patrie*, comes into existence when *moral sentiments* are incorporated into the equation. Historically speaking, Durkheim sees the process of the constitution of *patries* as a constant enlargement of political units since the medieval times; and he also maintained that the *patrie* was not a community of culture, but rather it was based on a political bond.

Normatively, *human* values are at the highest point of the moral hierarchy; these are the most general, unchangeable and even sublime (Durkheim 1992: 72-3). Yet, as a sociologist, Durkheim's arguments were not exclusively normative; Durkheim faced equally the problem of grounding these abstract moral values in social, political and cultural practices. The reproduction of social life is based in the fact that individuals have to 'live together' and the abstract notion of humanity is not strong enough to create the *social* sources of morality. Durkheim's argument is twofold here. On the one hand, modern social life requires the creation of a bond that must be based on the idea of the *patrie*. On the other hand, if the idea of humanity is missing, the result will be chauvinistic nationalism instead of patriotism. In Durkheim's (1992: 74-5) own words

If each State had as its chief aim, not to expand, or to lengthen its borders, but to set its own house in order and to make the widest appeal to its members for a moral life on a ever higher level, then all discrepancy between national and human morals would be excluded. If the State had no other purpose than making men of its citizens, in the widest sense of the term, the civic duties would be only a particular form of the general obligations of humanity. It is this course that evolution takes, as we have already seen. The more societies concentrate their energies inwards, on the interior life, the more they will be diverted from the disputes that bring a clash between cosmopolitanism —or world patriotism, and patriotism; as they grow in size and get greater complexity, so will they concentrate more and more on themselves (...) societies can have their pride, not in being

the greatest or the wealthiest, but in being the most just, the best organized and in possessing the best moral constitution

Universal values must be anchored in ‘really-existing’ communities, and Durkheim thought that the nation-state was indeed one very important form of modern socio-political community. To be practical and useful, the regulation of social life has to be carried out within a certain scale and range and, so far in modernity, that scale has been provided by the nation-state. Yet again, the ‘identity’ of the state – national patriotism – must be centred on emphasising the worth of human values. Despite the problems in Durkheim’s formulations – for instance, his naivety in dealing with the relationships between ‘altruist’ patriotism and ‘fanatic’ nationalism – Durkheim did not use the nation-state as the universal or necessary representation of society in modernity. Durkheim’s crucial thesis here is that the nation-state takes its normative value in relation and only in relation to the principles and ideals that have to be conceived of independently from the national framework. Yet, and this makes his argument even more interesting, a major feature of Durkheim’s sociology of the nation-state is that he emphasised the need for these values to be actualised *through* particular socio-political arrangements.

**Conclusion. Classical sociology and the opacity of the nation-state in modernity.**

As sociologists, the question for us is how to make sense of the current transformations and challenges now affecting the nation-state and I have argued that canon of classical sociologists can be good a company in the process of trying to accomplish that task. Yet, in the same way as this does not mean that we uncritically start reproducing their arguments and theorems, this is also a rejection of the view that their works remain of interest only for those interested in the history of social and political thought. In contradistinction to the thesis of classical sociology’s immanent methodological nationalism, I have tried to show in this article that these writers *systematically* confronted the tensions and difficulties that we now know have besieged all attempts at the conceptualization of the nation-state ever since (Billig 1995). Surely, classical sociologists were only partly able to deal successfully with these problems. But it is none the less remarkable that these same complications that once were seen as the very reason behind their lack of understanding of the nation-state can now be turned upside down and become the cornerstone of

a renovated understanding of the nation-state as a modern but not the only or most desirable form of socio-political arrangement.

Marx, Weber and Durkheim were, in their different ways, against the notion that, *as a concept*, the nation held any explanatory or causal value and one key feature of classical sociology as an intellectual tradition was that it rejected those nationalistic ways of thinking that were already predominant during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chernilo 2007b). As many of their contemporaries were, chauvinistically and nationalistically, arguing for the incommensurability national cultures, the particularism of national missions, and the salience of national *Sonderwegs*, classical sociologists severely criticised these nationalistic worldviews: these writers attempted to define the social – in general – rather than any particular national society (Frisby and Sayer 1986, Outhwaite 2006, Turner 2006). Marx theorised on the premature decline of the nation-state even before it reaches maturity so that one can never speak of modernity as composed only of modern nation-states; Weber commented upon the complicated connections between statehood and nationhood that are likely to create as many problems as those they were expected to solve; and Durkheim reflected on the agonising relationships between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that prevent us from distinguishing between the two as swiftly and neatly as we would want. Each one of them pointed towards a particular feature of the nation-state's development that has proved crucial ever since: its historical elusiveness, its sociological equivocations and its normative ambiguity.

The difficulties of periodising the nation-state as one single form of socio-political arrangement does not stop bullying scholars interested in the field. The controversy runs somehow deeper than the dispute between modernism and primordialism within nationalism studies because the most crucial sociological problem seems to be not so much whether it is meaningful to speak of nations before modernity but whether the idea and reality of the nation-state has remained one and the same throughout modernity. With regard to time, then, we are still trying to grasp the nation-state's incredible capacity to steer modernization processes and to reaffirm its loyalty to its own past and revered tradition all at once. Similarly, the question of the equivocal relationships between the nation and the state lies at the heart of the current representation of the world as neatly divided in nearly 200 formally equal political and administrative units. The problem is

apparent here not only because of the obvious disparities in the ability to mobilise power and all kinds of resources among those units but more crucially because such a representation simply prevents us from capturing the actual internal and external policies that had to be put in place for nation-states to forge their beloved but rather mythical harmony and unity. We now know that in creating themselves nation-states have consistently been divided, say, along ethnic and class lines so that disputes and struggles seem to have been the norm and not the exception. And finally, we seem to be growing increasingly accustomed to the fact that, normatively speaking, all claims to national sovereignty and self-determination require for its actual operation of the implicit assumption of a wider conception of human rights and the equal dignity of all human beings. We have become aware that there is a paradox underlying any affirmation of national autonomy because such a claim can only be granted if the group in question is equally prepared to recognise a similar dignity to all other peoples on earth who may eventually be interested in following a similar route towards national independence. The simple but relevant result of this almost trivial comment is that a rather thick conception of human rights underwrites all attempts at national autonomy: nationalism and cosmopolitanism; national self-determination and human rights are just two sides of the same coin. In my view, these are all issues and themes that can hardly be regarded as irrelevant or outdated for our times. And the canon of classical sociology may provide us with much required antidotes against the fallacy of presentism that effectively finds in any new *event* the beginning of a new *epoch*; against any simplistic accommodation between an equal right to self-determination for all nations and the actual ability to exercise this right for all states; and indeed against the naiveté with which normative ideals are flagged up only to find out then the lack of consistency with which they are deployed into the real world (Fine and Chernilo 2004). The nation-state's history, main features and legacy in modernity has proved elusive, equivocal and ambiguous in a way that classical sociology seems more able to capture and subtle to grasp than previously granted (Chernilo 2007a, Delanty and Kumar 2006).

The key lesson of the work of classical sociologists on this theme is that precisely because they were *not* obsessed with justifying the nation-state as the only or most developed form of socio-political arrangement in modernity their actual conceptualisation of the nation-state was, to an important extent at least, able to transcend any nationalistic framework. They seem to have understood that in modernity, arguably, only the nation-state has had such troubled history, has

been conceptually so equivocal and has left such an ambivalent normative legacy. Even if we account for the historical inaccuracies, conceptual deficiencies and normative contradictions in their works, the argument remains that classical social theory saw the nation-state as a historical formation in the making and maintained no idea of its necessary generalisation as a socio-political arrangement. In highlighting some aspects in each of their theorisation of the nation-state, then, a re-interpretation of the history, legacy, and main features of the nation-state in modernity has started to emerge.

## References

- Albrow, M. (1996) *The global age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1998) *Globalization*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (2000) *What is globalization?*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berman, M. (1982) *All that is solid melts into air*, London: Verso.
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Calhoun, C. (1997) *Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castells, M. (1997) *The power of identity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chernilo, D. (2006) 'Social theory's methodological nationalism: Myth and reality', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (1): 5-22.
- Chernilo, D. (2007a) *A social theory of the nation-state: The political forms of modernity beyond methodological nationalism*, London: Routledge.
- Chernilo, D. (2007b). 'A quest for universalism: Re-assessing the nature of classical social theory's cosmopolitanism', *European Journal of Social Theory* 10 (1): 17-35.
- Clarke, S. (1991) *Marx, marginalism and modern sociology*, London: Macmillan.
- Delanty, G. and Kumar, K. (eds.) (2006) *The SAGE handbook of nations and nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Durkheim, E. (1915) *Germany above all*, Paris: Collin.
- Durkheim, E. (1959) *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Durkheim E. (1964) *The division of labor in society*, NY: The Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1973) 'Individualism and the intellectuals' in Bellah, R. (ed) *On morality and society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Durkheim, E. (1992) *Professional ethics and civic morals*, London & NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fine, R. (2002) *Democracy and the rule of law*, New Jersey: The Balckburn Press
- Fine, R. and Chernilo, D. (2004) 'Between past and future: The equivocations of the new cosmopolitanism', *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society* 31: 25-44.
- Frisby, D. and Sayer, D. (1986) *Society*, London: Ellis Horwood and Tavistock.
- Giddens, A. (1973) *The class structure of the advanced societies*, London: Hutchinson.
- Giddens, A. (1985) *The nation-state and violence*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1986) *Durkheim on politics and the state*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jones, S. (2001) *Durkheim reconsidered*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Langewiesche, D. (2000) *Liberalism in Germany*, London: Macmillan.
- Layne, N. (1973) 'Durkheim as pacifist', *Sociological inquiry* 43 (2): 99-103.
- Llobera, J. (1994) 'Durkheim and the national question' in Pickering, W. S. F. & Martins, H. (ed.) *Debating Durkheim*, London: Routledge.
- Luhmann, N. (1997) *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Mann, M. (1986) *The sources of social power Vol. I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, M. (2004) *Fascists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Martins, H. (1974) 'Time and theory in sociology', in Rex, J. (ed.) *Approaches to sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1976) 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' in Marx, K & Engels, F. *Collected Works Vol. 6*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1978a) 'On the Jewish Question' in Tucker, R. (ed) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, London: Norton.
- Marx, K. (1978b) 'Contribution to the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' in Tucker, R. (ed) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, London: Norton.
- Marx, K. (1978c) 'The civil war in France' in Tucker, R. (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, London: Norton.
- Mommsen, W. (1984) *Max Weber and German Politics 1890-1920*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Outhwaite, W. (2006) *The future of society*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smelser, N. (1997) *Problematics of sociology*, Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

- Smith, A. D. (1979) *Nationalism in the twentieth century*, Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Smith, A. D. (1983) 'Nationalism and classical social theory', *British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1): 19-38.
- Thompson, K. (1982) *Emile Durkheim*, Chichester: Ellis Horwood & Tavistock.
- Turner, B. S. (1992) 'Preface to the second edition' in Durkheim, E. *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, London & NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Turner, B. S. (2006) 'Classical sociology and cosmopolitanism: A critical defence of the social', *British Journal of Sociology* 57 (1): 133-55.
- Turner, C. (1992) *Modernity and politics in the work of Max Weber*, London: Routledge.
- Urry, J. (2000) *Sociology beyond societies*, London: Routledge.
- Weber, M. (1970) 'The Nation' in Gerth, H. & Mills, C. W. (eds) *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Weber, M. (1978) *Economy and society*, Vol.1, London: University of California Press.
- Weber, M. (1994a) 'The Nation State and Economic Policy' in Weber, M. *Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, M. (1994b) 'The profession and vocation of politics' in Weber, M. *Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wimmer, A. and Schiller, N. (2002) 'Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks* 2 (4): 301-34.

---

\* **Daniel Chernilo** is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University Alberto Hurtado in Chile and a Fellow of the Centre for Social Theory at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *A Social Theory of the Nation-State: The Political Forms of Modernity beyond Methodological Nationalism* (Routledge, 2007). E-mail: [dchernil@uahurtado.cl](mailto:dchernil@uahurtado.cl)

### **Acknowledgements**

My thanks to Margaret Archer, Robert Fine, Jorge Larraín, Aldo Mascareño, William Outhwaite, Cristóbal Rovira and Guido Starosta, for help and suggestions at different stages of this research. The comments of two anonymous reviewers were also helpful in clarifying the line of argument most worth highlighting for this journal's readers.