

Nation and state

People tend to identify with their own kind, based on a shared ethnicity, culture, history, language, and religion. Here, the two I's of *ideas* and *identity* are the main bonding forces. What is unique about humans is that they also bond in this way in groups that are much larger than families or tribes and therefore surpass the number of people that can claim to know each other. When such large groups of people who are unknown to each other but nevertheless live together in a cohesive and enduring connection, they are often referred to as a **nation**.

A nation usually occupies a territory and can, but does not have to, be organized in a political unit. For instance, most **empires** encompassed several nations under the leadership of a single nation. Empires usually allowed religious and cultural differences to co-exist within its realm. The paradox of almost each empire was that they were established by violence and destruction but then continued by establishing their own civilization (often by using elements of the civilizations and cultures of the nations that were conquered). Empires have existed everywhere in the world, the first known empires dating from the 4th millennium BCE and the last ones being the European colonial empires (although it has been argued that hegemonical states like the United States and the Soviet Union also constituted empires, and the same is being said about certain corporate firms that are globally active).

Another type of political organization is the **nation-state** which assumes that its people form a single nation that shares a territory and shapes their nationhood by means of state education and national commemorations and religious holidays. Since the nineteenth century such nation-states have replaced empires, and emerged as the new world entity that expresses its desire for self-determination in a political unit called a state.

State and Empire

An **empire** is established by military force and encompasses large territories and many peoples. An empire can subsume one or more civilizations, and usually develops a new civilization within its realm.

A **state** can have two meanings: a) specific: a political unit that claims to have a single culture and people ('nation'); b) general: a political unit with an organized and complex form of governance (which may also apply to an empire, for instance).

Global structure and 3-I's

The nation-state has become so entrenched in today's world that it has become a global structure. This shows in several ways. First, all countries today express themselves as nation-states. The collapse of the last colonial empires resulted in the formation of numerous new states, so that the number of states has almost quadrupled since 1945.

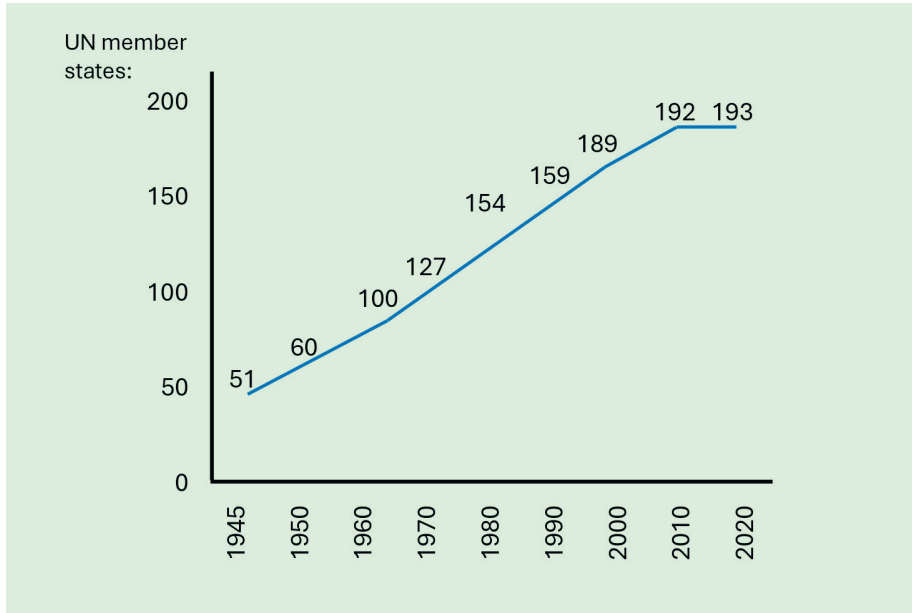


Figure II.3.1 The increase in number of states in the world

While many of these states may be based on civilizations and political units that had existed for centuries before they declared themselves states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the novelty of the 'state' is its structure. All states in the world work with the same organizational blueprint of parliament-government-judiciary, and almost all states refer to themselves as 'of', 'for' or 'by' the people (many states named themselves 'republic'). Finally, states have become the main drivers of almost all international and global activity, as we will see in the following chapters. In doing so, an international playfield has been created in which states are the main players. Even states that oppose the domination of an international order or morality – like Iran, Russia, China – play by the rules of that playfield.

The famous sentence “**Government of the people, by the people, for the people**” by President Lincoln in 1863 refers to a government owned by the people (‘of’), executed by the people (‘by’) and serving the people (‘for’).

All 3-I’s – *interests, ideas, identities* – are powerful drivers behind the notion of a state. They explain the existence of a state: to pursue the interests of its people, to be organized and governed in accordance with certain ideas, and to bind the people in a national identity. The 3-I’s are also helpful in explaining the actions of states towards each other. Such international relations are usually described in terms of interests: states trade, negotiate or wage war with each other in the pursuit of land, resources, and power. But ideas and identities are often just as important motivators for such interaction: national pride, political ideologies, religious or economic beliefs may push states to cooperate or to fight each other, just like identities – cultural, religious, linguistic, historical – can bring states together or push them apart.

States as we know them today have three important qualities. First, they have a connection with their population, which is often referred to as the ‘nation’. Second, states have developed a strong sense of being an independent, self-regulating unit that retains power over all people and issues within its borders – a notion known as sovereignty. And third, almost all states of today are modelled on a similar organizational structure. These three qualities will be discussed in more detail below.

The nation

The term ‘nation’ has acquired two meanings: a people sharing a cultural bond, and a people sharing a socio-political union (like a state or a form of self-governance). Today’s notion of the state assumes that these two – state and nation – conflate, but that is not always the case. Most states today will propagate their unity as a political nation, but very few consist of a single cultural nation. Also, all nations live in one state or another, but not all nations have their own state. The Kurds, for instance, are a nation with a strong sense of a shared history and culture and language, but they live in the states of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, where they partake in the social-political unity of each of those states.

A **nation** is a people who share a culture, history, language, ethnicity, religion, and who identify as a member of that nation. Ideally, a nation has its own territory and political organization (**nation-state**). However, most states today are made up of various nations, and a nation often lives in various states.

By the late nineteenth century, the notion of **self-determination** emerged, that is the right of a nation to determine its own fate (see chapter 'Equality and Self-determination'). This concept has been realized in various forms of autonomy for nations ranging from limited self-rule to full independent governance. The term nation-state is used when a nation regulates its affairs within an independent socio-political structure with its own territory and institutions. Ideally, this nation should share both a cultural and political-social bond, but reality proves differently.

Nationality and nationalism

The political and cultural bonds that one may feel as a person belonging to a nation converge in the notion of **nationality**. Nationality comprises both a legal and a cultural identity. Being 'Japanese' or 'Argentinian' means that one is the holder of a passport of that country which grants certain rights and duties, but it can also mean that one feels a cultural bond with that country. The difference between the two may show in the situation of migrants obtaining the nationality of the country they migrated to. This raises questions of a cultural nature: a Nigerian who obtains Japanese nationality, is she Japanese? She may consider herself Japanese, and may even speak fluent Japanese and be well-acquainted with Japanese history and culture, but will her fellow Japanese accept her as such? Being a 'native' of a country sometimes seems to be an extra prerequisite for belonging to a nation, together with one's appearance. (See also chapters 'Migration', 'Identity', and 'Transnationalism'.)

'National minorities', 'ethnic minorities', and 'Indigenous Peoples'

A state that perceives itself as a single political and cultural nation will refer to 'other' nations within the state as 'national minorities': they share the (legal) nationality of everyone in the state, but not the cultural identity of the majority. Three types of such minorities can be discerned.

A **national minority** is the minority that belongs to a nation that has a state elsewhere. Examples are the Chinese in Indonesia, the Germans in Hungary, the Tajiks in Afghanistan. The presence of these national minorities can be caused by their migration, or by state formation whereby borders were re-drawn so that a nation was carved up among several neighbouring states.

An **ethnic minority** is a nation that lives in more than one state, like the Yoruba in Nigeria, Benin and Togo, or the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq

Indigenous people are the people who are native to a land where other people have settled and taken over.

An important factor in the emergence of states as we know them today is **nationalism**. Nationalism is the oil in the process generating the bond that a

nation feels to a state and vice versa. Key roles are played by *identity* and *ideas*. The nations and their states are of such size that what binds its people cannot be established by personal relationships and interests, as would be the case in smaller communities, but must be accomplished by ideas and identities that are shared by all. A nation can consist of millions of people, but they nevertheless share this feeling of belonging together and to the country in which they live. For this reason, nations and states are also called ‘imagined communities’.

‘Imagined communities’

Nationalism imagines nations to exist, it creates something new, something that has not necessarily existed before.

(Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983)

Nationalism creates a bond among people who do not necessarily know each other. Unlike other ‘isms’, nationalism has no ideologues or worked-out ideologies. It emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century and became a *global trend* leading to the emergence of the state as we know it today. One effect of nationalism is that it is *exclusive*: it only applies to ‘our own kind’ and does not extend to others who have different cultures, languages, or religions, and it does not *want* to extend to those others. Here we see an important difference with the old empires that often contained many nations (although often the members of only one nation ruled). Nationalism has caused various instances of cultural domination of one nation over others (by imposing a single language and culture, for instance), sometimes even leading to **ethnic or religious cleansing** by removing other nations from the territory of the nation-state.

‘Successful’ ethnic cleansing

After several years of war, Greece and Turkey decided in 1923 that it was for the best to ‘exchange’ the peoples in each other’s countries. And so, an estimated 1 million Turkish people in Greece (many who had lived there for centuries) were moved to Turkey, and an estimated 1,5 million Greeks in Turkey (many of whom traced their roots to the ancient Greek colonies of more than two millennia ago) were moved to Greece. In the light of violent ethnic and religious cleansing in the Balkans at that time, this was considered a successful diplomatic solution.

Nationalism emphasizes as well as reinforces the nation’s bond by means of **national rituals and symbols**. Some of these are cultural traditions, others are

religious celebrations, and some are new traditions that have been invented for that purpose. Some rituals and symbols also specifically focus on the state itself, like raising the flag, singing the national anthem, cheering the national sports team, or performing commemorative services at a monument of the Unknown Soldier who died for the country. In doing so, people emphasize their national bond (which may be considered problematic when some citizens of a state have affiliations with another nation – see chapter ‘Transnationalism’). These expressions of celebrating statehood are today shared by all states.

‘Invented traditions’

Many national traditions that countries today celebrate may “appear or claim to be old [but] are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”

(Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1983)

Sovereignty

The second characteristic of today’s state is **sovereignty**, that is the right and the power to have full say on everything that happens within the state’s borders. Sovereignty is also explained as the principle that states should not interfere in each other’s internal affairs. One of the questions that has arisen since the 1990s is whether a humanitarian catastrophe in a state may justify the intervention by other states without permission by the state where the catastrophe is taking place. Some argue that in such a cases humanitarian needs overrule sovereignty. This is a hotly contested issue that will be discussed in the chapter ‘Security’.

Sovereignty also became a loaded issue with the emergence of international cooperation among states: when sovereign states agree to work together, does this mean they have to give up part of their sovereignty? We will see in chapter ‘International organizations’ that states are generally unwilling to do so. A similar discussion arose regarding *judicial* sovereignty, and the question of whether an international court can decide over issues pertaining to a state (see chapter ‘International agreements’). Relinquishing parts of judicial sovereignty became more common in the second half of the twentieth century but it remains contested: for the United Kingdom it was one of the reasons to leave the European Union in 2020 because it did not want the European Court of Justice to decide on British matters, and for the United States of America it has been the reason not to sign numerous international treaties.

Sovereignty is the right of states to manage their own national affairs in any way they see fit, without interference from other states.

Recognition

To be (or: to become) a sovereign state requires inward as well as outward action. Inwardly, people must organize themselves as a socio-political polity. To maintain the autonomy and independence of this polity, outward action is required in terms of international relations, often bolstered with the armed capacity to defend that independence if need be. In the 20th century, a new element was added to being a state: recognition by other states. This can create complex and paradoxical situations: what if a state has established sovereignty but is not recognized as such (Somaliland)? What if a nation is recognized as a state even though it is not a functioning state (Palestine)? What if most states want to recognize a state but decide not to do so as not to antagonize one of the great powers (Taiwan)?

Recognition as a state

There are functioning states that are member the United Nations even though they are not recognized by all world states, like Israel (not recognized by 30 of the 193 world states) or Kosovo (not recognized by 49 of the 193 world states). Taiwan is a fully functioning state but is not a member of the United Nations and is only recognized by 12 states (a situation that created under pressure by China). Palestine is an example of a state that is not functioning as a full state, and that is not member of the United Nations, but that by 2025 was recognized by 145 of the 193 world states.

International recognition and (military) state power make up for an uneasy balance. History is rife with examples of states that conquered (parts of) other states whereby these conquered lands, in due time, became accepted as part of the conquering state. Nonetheless, a state may incorporate parts of other states by means of military power and claim that this land is now part of their state, even though it is not recognized by the majority of world states (examples are Russia in Ukraine and Georgia, Israel in Gaza, Golan, East Jerusalem and the Westbank). Opposed to one state claiming a territory, the reverse can also happen, that is, when a territory (and its people) claim independence from the state to which it officially belongs. The world states recognized this claim to independence by Timor-Leste from Indonesia (2002), for instance, but not by Catalonia from Spain (2019).



Figure II.3.2 In 1976, Burnum Burnum of the Wurundjeri tribe planted the Aboriginal flag in the shores of Dover and symbolically claimed England: “In claiming this colonial outpost, we wish no harm to you natives.”

Micro-states and Micro-nations

Micro-states is the term for states that are very small in size and population (examples are Andorra, Comoros, Tuvalu). **Micro-nation** is the term commonly used for tiny entities, sometimes not more than rocks in the sea or a piece of land the size of several football fields, that claim independence. They often make a point of having their own flag, national anthem, and stamps. No one takes them seriously, and they are usually dismissed as a laughing matter. But they do touch upon the fundamental question what it means to become a sovereign state. Examples are North Dumpling Island (Conn., US); Conch Republic (Florida, US); Freetown Christiana (Denmark); Republic of Saugeais (France); Principality of Seborga (Italy), Principality of Hutt River (Australia.)

Organization of a state

Almost all states today have a similar organizational structure. What follows is a brief outline of the main elements of this organizational structure. The emphasis hereby will be on the Humanities perspective, both externally and internally.

Externally, we see that states often behave like human organisms, with emotions of pride, rage, fear, and so on. This is the stuff of (national) identity, which is a powerful mover of states. Internally, we see a similar dynamic whereby the various state organs can operate as actors by themselves.

Trias politica

Almost all states today adhere to the organizational structure of *trias politica*, the nineteenth century concept of a division between the executive (government), the legislative (parliament) and the judicial (courts) power. This was considered the best form of government and apparently is still considered to be so as all states are structured along these lines. If it is all functioning well, then an important condition is fulfilled of what today we call 'good governance' (see chapter 'Democracy and good governance'). But reality can be very different. This is because of what people do with these structures. There can be wide discrepancies between the structures as outlined on paper and the manners in which they function in practice. But today even the most autocratic rulers feel the need to legitimize their rule by paying lip service to the *trias politica*.

Bureaucracy

The civil service, better known as the bureaucracy, is a governmental power that is often underestimated. Civil servants are not elected, and they represent continuity while governments come and go. That is why they are also called the 'fourth power', in addition to the three official powers of government, parliament, and judiciary.

Civil society

States are usually divided between the state institutions and the people. In quite a few states the people are given a rather passive role, as the power is exercised by the institutions, and people can only let their voice be heard during elections. However, people often organize themselves (unless the state represses this) in parties, unions, organizations, churches, communities, clubs, and so on. The aims of these organizations can be very different: it can be to influence politics, do business, help the poor, play sports, promote culture, discuss current events. But the main feature of all these organized activities is that they are undertaken not by the government but by the people themselves. All this activity together is called **civil society** which is also described as a **public sphere** that hovers between the population and their governing institutions.

According to **Civil Society Theory**, the notion of civil society can explain the mechanisms of democracy. This theory argues that civil society is beneficial to a thriving democracy because the more people organize themselves, the more they

discuss, criticize, promote and support certain issues that they find important, the more a country will become governed by and for the people. In the 1990s this theory became popular among policy makers in Western countries who promoted the support for civil society in non-democratic countries to enhance the formation of democratic structures in those countries (see chapter 'Democracy').

“Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres.”

(Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 2004 (repr. from 1996), p. 367)

Social movements

The concept of civil society may explain the workings of democracy, but it does not explain why people rally for a cause, take to the street to demonstrate, or find other ways to pressure governments to make social or political changes. To study these phenomena, the Humanities uses the notion of social movements. A social movement is not an organization as we might find in civil society; a social movement emerges – often spontaneously and unexpectedly – and is loosely organized. While civil societies usually function on a national level only, social movements may take on global proportions. Examples are the climate movement, the anti-globalization movement, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo. Social movements are mostly mass movements, and, of course, members and organizations of civil society participate in them. For instance, the choirs and music organizations of Estonian civil society participated in the independence movement of 1990, just as the student unions participated in the Hong Kong demonstrations of 2019, and in the climate movement we find many established civil society organizations that work on sustainable development, nature preservation and ecology.

Social Movement Theories

‘Social Movement Theories’ (or ‘SMT’) stands for various theories that try to explain the mechanisms of social movements. The wide variety of SMT theories is a result of the variety of questions that are addressed: What is the goal of these movements? What is the opportunity that made the movement happen? What is the diagnosis of the issue that movement is protesting for (or against), and does it present solutions? Do the members of the movement share an identity?

Further reading

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- Philipp Ther, *The Dark Side of Nation-States. Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*, Berghahn, 2014