2000

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Recommended Citation

Chimene Keitner, *National Self Determination in Historical Perspective 1789/1989 The Legacy of the French Revolution for Today's Debates*, 2 *International Studies Review* 3 (2000).

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National Self-Determination in Historical Perspective: The Legacy of the French Revolution for Today's Debates

Chimène I. Keitner

A significant number of today's most violent conflicts seem to be fueled, if not created, by the desire of nations to control their own states. Recent headlines include renewed bombing by Basque separatists, the outbreak of hostilities along the Eritrean–Ethiopian border, demonstrations and clashes over secession in the Comoros, heightened tension between China and Taiwan over the island's political status, investigations into past violence in East Timor and reports of current violence in Aceh, and accusations of torture by Russian soldiers in Chechnya. It may not be a world war, but much of the world is at war. What is going on here? And how can we better understand it?

The nation–state principle posits an international society composed of sovereign nation–states. Although the assumption that nations and states should be congruent may appear outdated or benign, it may create volatile expectations and lead to secessionist and irredentist claims. These are likely to arise when socioeconomic and political discontent becomes focused on discrepancies between the boundaries of historically and culturally distinct communities and the borders of states whose control over these groups is perceived as illegitimate.

This article analyzes the normative framework within which nation-based demands for political and territorial control are articulated and addressed. The goal is to introduce greater conceptual clarity into debates about the nature and validity of these claims. The French Revolution is often upheld as the birthplace of the modern nation–state and of modern nationalism more

generally.¹ Although oversimplified, this accepted wisdom offers a fruitful starting point for exploring the origins and implications of enduring understandings about the relationship between nations and states as the building blocks of international society.

The idea of “one nation, one state” (the nation–state principle) and the corresponding conviction that self-identified nations ought to have control of their own states (national self-determination) yield a cluster of political and ethical arguments with both internal and external resonance. Internally, these ideas are used to mobilize particular populations by legitimating and channeling frustration in the face of exclusion from the dominant political order, unjust treatment by those in power (especially vis-à-vis other identifiable groups), and lack of redress within existing governmental structures. Externally, these arguments and the assumptions they entail bolster nation-based claims in the global arena, centered largely on the idea of a people’s right to self-determination contained in U.N. instruments and drafted in the context of decolonization.

From the French revolutionaries to Giuseppe Mazzini to Abdullah Ocalan, political leaders have found the idea of the nation particularly resonant and powerful. The ambiguity of the nation makes it problematic as a conceptual category but enhances its attractiveness as a platform for political mobilization. According to David Miller, a nation can be defined as “a community of people with an aspiration to be politically self-determining,” and a state as “the set of political institutions that they may aspire to possess for themselves.”² Statehood is valued because it enshrines internal control over a given territory and population and external sovereignty in international relations, including freedom from intervention by other states (except perhaps in cases of egregious human rights abuse). Nations achieve internal control and external independence through recognition as sovereign states and thus as members of international society.

Sovereign statehood is not the only—and perhaps not even the most common—political embodiment of nations in the contemporary international system, but it remains a basic aspiration and entitlement of nations in a purely nation–statist model. Despite the growing importance of regional organizations, multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and other

¹ See, for example, Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1996), p. 2; G.P. Gooch, *Studies in Modern History* (London: Longmans, 1931), p. 217; Eugene Kamenka, “Political Nationalism—The Evolution of the Idea,” in E. Kamenka, ed., *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 10; Hans Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States: The French and German Experience 1789–1815* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1967), p. 82; and Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 18.

² David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1995), p. 19.

nonstate actors in international relations, it is probably still safe to say that we live—or at least *think* we live—in a world of nation–states. The “right of self-determination” of peoples enshrined in Article I of the United Nations Charter and in Common Article 1 of the 1966 Covenants is generally limited to the context of decolonization when understood as a right to sovereign statehood.³ Yet this restriction is difficult to justify within a nation–statist model. There is no self-evident reason why the metaoption of separate statehood ought to be granted to former colonies but denied to other self-identified national groups.

Of course, “the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples” is difficult to operationalize without a clear definition of “peoples.”⁴ Virtually all formulations of self-determination seem to take for granted the existence of distinct and identifiable collectives, and for good reason: after all, if a nation is defined only by its political institutions, then the nation–state principle is a truism, and the story ends there.⁵ Ian Brownlie’s definition of self-determination as “the right of cohesive national groups (‘peoples’) to choose for themselves a form of political organization and their relation to other groups”; John Stuart Mill’s observation that “one hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do if not to determine with which of the various collective bodies of human beings they choose to associate themselves”; and Ernest Gellner’s affirmation that “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent”—all postulate the existence of prepolitical nations that provide an independent standard for the legitimacy of states.⁶

In the nation–statist model, state legitimacy depends on whether the state embodies a particular nation, or at least whether the nations within the state have consented to its control. Whether or not nations are actually freestanding entities that exist in the world, the idea of national self-determination as a logical corollary of the nation–state principle offers a potent platform for chal-

³ See Aureliu Cristescu, *The Right to Self-Determination: Historical and Current Development on the Basis of UN Documents*, E/CN.4/Sub.2/404/Rev.1; and Héctor Gros Espiell, *The Right to Self-Determination: Implementation of UN Resolutions*, E/CN.4/Sub.2/405/Rev.1.

⁴ Woodrow Wilson’s alleged comment that he “knows a people when he sees one” provides little reassurance on this point.

⁵ Not surprisingly, this tautology is strongly endorsed by existing states seeking to preclude secessionist claims.

⁶ Ian Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law*, 5th ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 599; John Stuart Mill, “Representative Government” (1861), *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, and The Subjection of Women* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 381; and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1983), p. 1.

lenging the political and territorial status quo.⁷ Practical obstacles and conflicts may arise, but these do not impair the soundness of the principle itself: to each nation, its own state.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE NOTION OF VOLUNTARIST NATIONALISM

Where does the French Revolution fit into all of this? Proponents of the nation–state principle tend to take it as a given—a set of core assumptions based on shared understandings, if not common sense. But there is nothing natural or inevitable about nation–states, and few states in the world conform to this ideal model. Far from making the presumed congruence between nations and states obsolete, this disjunction gives rise to conflicting and potentially irreconcilable perspectives and expectations. The tension between the pervasiveness of non-national states and the persistence of normative standards based largely, if implicitly, on the nation–state principle fuels inconsistency and even incoherence in international law and practice.

The idea of an international system composed of sovereign states, generally dubbed the Westphalian model, provides a structural framework for relations between distinct political and territorial units. Standing alone, this model offers few criteria besides effective control for delineating states and investing them with the rights and duties of membership in international society. Elements of this model characterize current international relations: effective control remains an important (though no longer exclusive) test for state recognition, and states are still considered the central members of international society, with this status enshrined by membership in the United Nations.

Although the United Nations could not be called the “United States” for obvious reasons, there is something deeper at work in the frequent conflation of the terms “nation” and “state” in popular, political, and even scholarly discourse. This “something deeper” stems largely from the tacit assumption that all states are or should be nation–states. If the Treaty of Westphalia provides a convenient, though not entirely historically accurate, shorthand for the birth of the modern state system, then the French Revolution performs a similar function for the idea of the modern nation–state.

In the ideal version of this model, prepolitical nations should determine the legitimacy of states for both consequentialist and deontological reasons. On a practical level, national ties are presumed to ensure the cohesiveness and administrability of a linguistically and culturally unified population and to motivate

⁷ For a brief analytical overview of this phenomenon, see Chimène I. Keitner, “Power and Identity in Nationalist Conflicts,” *Oxford International Review* 8, No. 2 (1997), pp. 2–10.

the compliance and commitment of a polity's members to its institutions and commands, based on the presumed identification between the government and the governed. This presumed identification is also valued in itself as a moral good because of the conviction that people should be—and would choose to be—governed by members of their own community. In this picture, national self-determination supports the values of both collective identity and individual choice.

The two senses of self-government—participation of the population in political decisions through voting and identity between the government and the governed—are often conflated. There are at least two reasons why the idea of national self-determination (the presumption that a nation should have control of its own state) is often closely connected to ideals of liberation and democratic self-governance. First, it seems intuitively plausible (if not borne out by experience) that a people is best able to choose and to implement its own conception of the good life when governed by its own members. Second, the concrete historical connection between the rise of the nation as a political platform and the overthrow of monarchy during the French Revolution helped fuse the ideas of national self-determination and popular sovereignty in political rhetoric and in the popular imagination.

Despite the auspicious beginnings of the French Revolution in proclaiming the nation the fundamental source of political sovereignty and legitimacy, Napoleonic conquest in the early nineteenth century and German aggression in the twentieth revealed the darker side of nationalist policies. They demonstrated the potential for internal oppression and the appetite for external domination. More recently, campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” and the rise of the rhetoric of “blood and belonging” in the Balkans and other regions have further discredited the idea that national bonds based on the reality or the fiction of common descent should be regarded as legitimate foundations of modern political communities. The feeling persists that there is something important, in principle and practice, behind the conviction that shared identity and understanding is valuable, and perhaps even necessary for a democratic polity to remain cohesive and responsive to its members' needs. This intuition is particularly strong in the face of disunity and discontent in what are perceived as increasingly pluralistic and fragmented state populations.

The impulse to preserve some element of the nation-state idea has led to a common distinction between ethnic and civic varieties of nationalism; the latter continues generally to be advocated and endorsed. The French Revolution seems to exemplify civic nationalism, as the French population at the time of the Revolution was clearly too diverse to constitute an ethnic nation, and revolutionary rhetoric tended to focus on political rights rather than ethnic belonging. Yet the uncritical identification of the French Revolution with a purely civic model misses crucial aspects of the revolutionary view of the nation as the basis for political legitimacy and the ultimate source and holder of sovereignty. As

noted, the nation–state principle makes sense as a standard for territorial delineation and political control only if one can point to a prepolitical nation independent of its institutional manifestations. It would be circular to appeal to institutions to justify institutions, so nationalist leaders must appeal to something else.

The discrediting of strategies that invoke a preexisting ethnic “something else,” based on the idea of individuals belonging involuntarily and essentially to an ethnic nation, has led to support for voluntarist models of national membership as the products of individual choice. But this choice cannot simply be manifested in allegiance to the political institutions of the state. One must be able to differentiate between the nation and the state, both conceptually and concretely, if the former is to serve as a basis for legitimating or challenging the latter. The following analysis of revolutionary principles and practice reveals that appeals to civic nationhood are not immune from the problems associated with invoking other prepolitical forms of belonging. At the same time, the importance of cohesion, understanding, and commitment within a political body suggests why nationalist arguments are persuasive to begin with and why they cannot be completely discredited or ignored.

THE FOUR PARADOXES

The French Revolution, as might be expected, may be characterized by multiple and even competing historical narratives. The conjunction of numerous factors provided the occasion for a series of uprisings and political challenges that began in 1789 and endured for the better part of a decade: the perceived inefficiency and financial instability of the monarchy under Louis XVI; a pervasive resentment toward the privileges of the nobility and the clergy harbored by the increasingly powerful merchant and professional classes (the Third Estate); insecurity and agitation among peasants resulting in part from a particularly bad harvest after the winter of 1788; and an intellectual climate charged by a spirit of inquiry and challenge to existing models, not least in matters of government. Although this analysis focuses on the conceptual and institutional transformations of the revolutionary decade, it is important not to lose sight of the socioeconomic preconditions to these fundamental shifts.

Political terms, especially new and abstract ones, are not used in precisely the same way by each contemporary speaker, nor do they travel through time and space unchanged. But the unmistakable rise to prominence of the “nation” in revolutionary rhetoric, including justifications for both domestic and international actions, and the subsequent attribution of the idea of nation–statehood to the revolutionary experience, argue strongly in favor of examining revolutionary debates as a key to a deeper understanding of the uses and abuses of nationhood.

A study of the emergence of the nation as a political platform during the French Revolution produces a framework of four paradoxes: conception, con-

stitution, composition, and confrontation. The tensions captured by these headings remain relevant and problematic in the present. The paradox of conception relates to the difficulty of thinking of the nation as an entity separate from its political institutions. The nation–state principle in theory (if not in practice) treats nations as preexisting groups of people united by a certain kind of bond that makes them particularly suited to and deserving of exclusive control over their own government and territory. Yet it is unclear how this notion of prepolitical nationhood applies to the case of a voluntarist nation ostensibly defined by individual choice and commitment rather than biological characteristics, reflecting the kind of nation the French Revolution is generally seen as having championed and the model of nationhood upheld by many as the most appealing and deserving of support today.

The paradox of constitution highlights a second problem—that is, identifying who can speak legitimately on the nation's behalf. The risk that political powerseekers will take advantage of the availability of nationalist platforms to further their own aims may be difficult to avoid. This suggests a need for caution in attributing *prima facie* legitimacy to those who claim to speak for the nation. At the same time, it is unclear that other actors could effectively drive political and institutional change and whether they could do so in the name of something other than the nation.

The paradox of composition focuses on a later stage of the nation–state's development, when the time comes to delineate insiders and outsiders to establish government policies and distribute social benefits. Even—and perhaps especially—in a voluntarist nation, the dual impulses to refine the definition of national membership (to aid excluding political opponents) and to make it “thicker” and more concrete (to solidify bonds of allegiance and belonging) may engender illiberal and arbitrarily restrictive results.

Finally, the paradox of confrontation focuses on the principles guiding interaction among sovereign political units in the international arena. During the French revolutionary period, the desire to reestablish France as a great power within the existing international system operated alongside many revolutionaries' self-assigned mission of transforming that system into one composed exclusively of self-determining nation–states (self-determining on a strictly French model). The result of their efforts was a series of violent and protracted wars. Taken together, these paradoxes illustrate the quandaries of the revolutionary experiment and suggest the complexities underlying the idea of national self-determination as a basis for international political order.

Conception: How to Imagine a Voluntarist Nation?

The paradox of conception highlights the difficulty of conceiving of a prepolitical entity without reference to its institutional manifestations, especially if that entity is envisaged as “voluntarist” rather than defined by preexisting and

readily apparent characteristics and ties. Although such complications could have rendered nationalist arguments more precarious and less useful during the French revolutionary period, they in fact contributed to the expediency and popularity of the nation as a particularly malleable and potent platform for making political and territorial claims.

During the eighteenth century, successive waves of political actors seeking greater influence within and beyond the monarchy found that they first had to challenge the self-referential and self-justifying quality of monarchical rule. They did this by developing and relying on the idea of the nation as distinct from and prior to the king. This idea evoked both an embryonic notion of the French population as a rights-bearing (if passive) constituency and a more abstract vision of the nation as a historically transcendent source of authority separate from the monarch, who could no longer claim exclusively to embody or represent it.

Shifts in fundamental understandings about the nature and justification of political institutions (driven largely by power struggles among various political actors) were accompanied and catalyzed by transformations in the words used to express basic political concepts, and even in the concepts themselves. The changes in everyday language were palpable, beginning in the 1750s and carrying through to the revolutionary decade. One contemporary observed the following:

Never have the words *nation* and *state* been as frequently used as they are today: these two terms were never uttered under Louis XIV; even the idea of them was lacking. We have never been so aware as we are today of the rights of the nation and of liberty.⁸

At the height of the absolute monarchy, the king was, in effect, the embodiment of three other entities: the state (the territory plus the administrative structure), the nation (the population thought of in an abstract but territorially defined fashion), and the people (his actual subjects). A distinction among these categories was precluded by definition.

By 1766, Louis XV could no longer simply assert his authority as had his ostensibly omnipotent predecessor. Instead, he felt compelled to defend it:

As if anyone could forget that the sovereign power resides in my person only. . . that public order in its entirety emanates from me and that the rights and interests of the nation, which some dare to regard as a separate body from the

⁸ Marquis d'Argenson, entry from June 26, 1754, in Jacques B. Rathéry, ed., *Journal et mémoires du marquis d'Argenson*, vol. 8 (Paris, 1866), p. 315; translated in Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 22.

monarch, are necessarily united with my rights and interests, and repose only in my hands.⁹

By affirming that the nation's interests were united with his own and depended on him, Louis XV in fact contributed to the very distinction that he was trying to negate. Louis XVI did the same in calling for the Nation to rescue the State during the fiscal crisis of 1788–89. The nation could perhaps bolster the state, but it could also check it. This was the first step on the path to the nation becoming the state's very basis.

This process of consolidating the self-image of the French people as a nation was reflected in and enhanced by the use of the adjective “national.” One satirical tract written in the form of a dictionary (a common polemical strategy) explains this word, wryly emphasizing its pervasiveness:

[“national” is an] adjective that qualifies all that belongs to the nation; moreover, everything belongs to the nation, so everything is national. . . . Since the revolution our physical and moral way of being has become entirely national; our dress, from the cockade down to the buckles, is national. Our way of thinking, Lord knows how national it is! and our written works are like our thoughts.¹⁰

This citation shows how all-encompassing the revolutionary idea of the nation could become.¹¹ It provides testimony, however mocking, to the transformation of language and mentalities and to their manifestation in everyday life.

By the time of the Revolution, the nation was poised to become the central platform for claims to political legitimacy and territorial control. This was reflected in the definition of crimes of treason and the words for describing it, which ultimately went from *lèse-majesté* (treason to the king) to *lèse-nation*, *lèse-patrie*, *lèse-liberté*, and even *lèse-humanité* (treason to the nation, to the country, to liberty, and to humanity).¹² Changes in the word for treason reflected the prescribed transfer of loyalty from the king to the nation and to the values of the French revolutionary nation–state. The meanings of these new political

⁹ Jules Flammermont ed., *Remontrances du parlement de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1888–98), p. 557; translated in John Rothney, *The Brittany Affair and the Crisis of the Ancien Régime* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 177.

¹⁰ Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, *Dictionnaire national et anecdotique pour servir à l'intelligence des mots dont notre langue s'est enrichie depuis la révolution, et à la nouvelle signification qu'ont reçue quelques anciens mots* (Paris: Politicopolis, 1790), pp. 132–33, author's trans.

¹¹ The permanent exhibit on the Revolution at the Musée Carnavalet, Paris, displays everything from dinnerware painted with revolutionary mottoes to trunks with metal locks sculpted in the shape of the Bastille.

¹² Beatrice Fry Hyslop, *French Nationalism in 1789, According to the General Cahiers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), p. 159.

terms did not go uncontested. But far from compromising the importance of new concepts, such debates in fact confirmed the theoretical and practical centrality of the nation in the emerging political order.

The revolutionary account of the relationship between king and nation, and its expression in political vocabulary, ultimately defined the criteria for political authority in France. The conceptual relationship between nation and state in a nation–statist framework is most clearly explained in Léon Duguit’s (much later) *Treatise on Constitutional Law*:

The nation is the original holder and source of sovereignty. The nation is a person, with all the attributes of personality, conscience, and will. The person *nation* is, in reality, distinct from the State; it is anterior to it (the State); the State cannot exist except where there is a nation; and the nation can subsist even when the State no longer exists or does not yet exist.¹³

This vision lies at the heart of a nation-based account of the political and territorial legitimacy of states, on both the domestic (internal) and the international (external) levels.

The idea of a voluntarist nation seems compelling—not least for Western liberals seeking to establish consistent global standards for state legitimacy—as it appears to offer grounds for social cohesion, territorial delineation, and political mobilization that are maximally inclusive and minimally predetermined. But its viability as an international political standard is by no means self-evident. The voluntarist nation seems at odds with the nation–statist assumption that there are preexisting nations, which, because of their prepolitical solidarity, cohesion, and distinctiveness, are entitled to their own territorial states. The question of what criteria one could point to as evidence of the existence of a prepolitical, voluntarist nation remains unanswered, jeopardizing the coherence of this category as a basis for adjudicating political and territorial claims.

Constitution: How to Give the Nation a Political Voice?

As the preceding argument suggests, concrete power struggles within the French monarchy served as a driving force behind the ever-increasing emphasis on the idea of the nation. In coopting and implementing the contractualist requirement of popular consent (loosely adopted from political theorists including Jean-Jacques Rousseau) to bolster their own importance, the parlements (French sovereign law courts) discovered and enshrined the effectiveness of claims for political power made in the name of the nation, which was a rhetorical entity abstract enough to be manipulated yet concrete enough to be compelling. Not

¹³ Léon Duguit, *Traité de droit constitutionnel* 2d ed., vol. 1 (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1921), p. 607.

surprisingly, the deliberate use of the nation by the parlements as a vehicle for their own political ambitions had the unintended effect of opening the door for other self-styled national spokespeople to override the parlements' claims.

The paradox of constitution focuses on the need to rely on those who speak on behalf of the nation to validate and implement the nation's political demands.¹⁴ In theory, the revolutionary nation became a political actor; in practice, politics became a competition between individuals and parties claiming to speak on the nation's behalf. Political discourse became a kind of reverse ventriloquism, whereby rhetoricians asserted that they were speaking in the nation's name and even with the nation's voice; conflicting claims led successive leaders to be denounced as "inauthentic" and replaced with often equally precarious pretenders.¹⁵ In this fashion, the nation developed into a central legitimating platform without necessarily promoting the interests of the individuals within it or contributing to political stability.

The political claims of the parlements were articulated and popularized through official "remonstrances," petitions submitted to the king and often published and circulated illicitly among the population at large. The remonstrances had three important effects from the perspective of this analysis. First, they emphasized the distinction between king and state, extrapolating from the abstract idea of so-called "fundamental laws" as restraints on the arbitrary exercise of monarchical power to suggest the conditional nature of the king's legitimacy, separate from the stable existence of the French state *per se*. Second, they reinforced the idea of a people with its own rights and interests, which had to be protected (by the parlements) against unjustified encroachment. Third, they enshrined the concept of the nation as a particularly strong and compelling way to represent the French population as spatially unified and temporally continuous, creating a practice of making political claims in the nation's name. These three developments were essential stages in the emergence of the nation as the basis of the state's legitimacy and a central platform for claims to political power.

The parlements championed the nation's importance incrementally. According to parliamentary rhetoric, only those who upheld the rights of the nation could stake a legitimate claim to political power. The more the parlements felt their own existence was threatened, the more they emphasized the importance of the nation and their unique role in protecting it. A typical remonstrance insists on the importance of consulting the nation, represented by the parlements:

¹⁴This leads to a certain circularity since, as Paul Gilbert suggests, "the ability to support [and, one might add, to articulate] a claim to statehood is partly *constitutive* of our notion of a nation" ("Criteria of Nationality and the Ethics of Self-Determination," *History of European Ideas* 16, Nos. 4–6 [1993], pp. 515–520; quote on p. 516).

¹⁵This trope of authenticity surfaces in both civic and ethnic forms of nationalism.

This right could not be lost for the Nation; it is imprescriptible, inalienable. To attack this principle is to betray not only the Nation, but kings themselves; it is to overturn the constitution of the Kingdom, it is to destroy the foundation of the authority of the Monarch.¹⁶

The parlements presented themselves as indispensable to the king's political survival while they staked out their own political territory. Although clever, this approach proved difficult to sustain, as the parlements' emphasis on the rights of the nation eventually overrode their claims to bolster the king. From mere guardians of the social contract, the parlements soon portrayed themselves as the defenders, and ultimately the voice, of the nation itself.

The nation thus proved a crucial platform for the parlements' claims—as long as they could ensure a monopoly on its use. Predictably, this strategy proved dangerous by paving the way for the appropriation of the parlements' arguments by other political contenders. The parlements' emphasis on the primacy of the nation and the importance of national consent became disengaged from parliamentary rhetoric and entered popular political discourse, laying the foundations for a radical reconceptualization of the nature and origins of legitimate political authority, with ultimate consequences beyond parliamentary control.

Facing a debt crisis at the end of 1788, the king convoked the Estates General, an official meeting of representatives of the three estates (the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate), last called in 1614. This move opened the door for a new, more “authentic” set of national spokespeople to replace the parlements as the voice of the French nation. Specifically, the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly in response to its perceived exclusion from meaningful political debates in an act often upheld as marking the beginning of the revolutionary uprising. The title “National Assembly” captures the delegates' conviction in the supremacy of the nation and their desire to be viewed as its authoritative voice.¹⁷

The danger that the recognition of authoritative national spokespeople might undermine the voluntarist premises behind support for popular participation in government was not lost on the critics of political reform. André-Quentin Buée tersely bemoaned: “*The good of the people is the supreme law: a perfectly vague maxim, and, by that alone, a perfectly tyrannical one.*”¹⁸ Jean-Pierre

¹⁶ *Remonstrances of the Parlement of Bordeaux*, February 25, 1771; in Roger Bickart, *Les Parlements et la notion de souveraineté nationale* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1932), p. 79, author's trans.

¹⁷ *Gazette nationale ou le moniteur universel, Assemblée Constituante* 1, No. 9, session of June 17, 1789, p. 83.

¹⁸ André-Quentin Buée, *Nouveau dictionnaire pour servir à l'intelligence des termes mis en vogue par la Révolution* (Paris, 1792), pp. 96–97, author's trans.

Gallais concurred: "In every town, in every village, we find the nation exercising all the rights of sovereignty, which at times obtains for us rather ferocious sovereigns."¹⁹ These concerns, present from the beginning, were voiced with increasing urgency as the Revolution progressed. The struggle for political power exacerbated the theoretical tensions captured in the paradox of conception, with ultimately authoritarian results.

The creation of the National Assembly began as part of an attempt to reinforce monarchical legitimacy by reaffirming the nation's support for the king in the face of perceived usurpation of political power by the privileged classes. Yet the king's reluctance to accept a constitutional mandate, which would have circumscribed his absolute power, added grist to the mill of more radical reform. The National Assembly, created to represent the nation before the king, ended up institutionalizing the primacy of the nation itself.

The nation may be conceptualized as a prepolitical association, but it is only by adopting concrete institutions that it can translate theoretical power into effective political sway. This is where the paradox of constitution complicates the paradox of conception. The practical imperative of institutionalizing the nation to render its political claims effective means that those who succeed in speaking for the nation will in fact become the authors of the national will.

In addition, because the much vaunted unity of national identity and purpose is often expressed in—if not created by—state institutions like the National Assembly, the nation and the state become even more difficult to distinguish, further muddying the possibility of evaluating them separately. This tends to undermine the value of the nation as an independent legitimating basis for the state or a means of adjudicating between rival territorial and political claims. The paradox of constitution compounds this dilemma by enhancing the presumptive legitimacy of nation-based demands without providing a guide to evaluate their credibility apart from the convictions of those who make them.

Composition: How to Define Insiders and Outsiders?

The revolutionary revision of the French polity enshrined national (as opposed to royal) sovereignty as the source of and justification for political authority. Article III of the famous *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* proclaimed: "The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body, no individual may exercise any authority that does not emanate

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Gallais, *Extrait d'un dictionnaire inutile, Composé par une Société en commandite, & rédigé par un homme seul* (A 500 lieues de l'Assemblée nationale, 1790), p. 179, n. 1, author's trans.

expressly from the nation.”²⁰ National self-determination replaced absolute monarchy as the standard for both domestic and international legitimacy.²¹

The idea of national sovereignty provided the theoretical basis for the constitution of the nation–state. But what about its concrete composition? Simply positing the sovereignty of the nation was insufficient to ensure the viability of the state created in the nation’s name. Criteria for national membership had to be identified and bonds of solidarity cultivated to foster political allegiance, compliance, and support for the revolutionary regime. Despite the importance of conceptual self-creation, national cohesion had to be based on more than just a contractual fiction to underpin the unity and effectiveness of the revolutionary state. The question was (and remains) how to forge a voluntarist nation. The paradox of composition encapsulates this imperative and accounts for its potentially illiberal results.

Although the monarchical nation had been held together by the king and delineated by his administration, the revolutionaries defined their version of the nation more subjectively and even metaphysically, based on the people’s will to live together as a sovereign unit. The “will to live together” was assumed to exist among members of the French nation (those who spoke the French language or had a French “heart”), but not among undesirables: counter-revolutionaries, reactionary priests, or (during the years of the Terror) those who sought to challenge whoever happened to be in power or was considered politically or socially subversive. Solidarity was forged positively through symbols and festivals, but also negatively through exclusion and even executions.

As the decade progressed, the perceived precariousness of successive revolutionary regimes fostered an exclusionary and even monolithic definition of national membership in response to the need to galvanize the nation as a bulwark against competing sources of political authority and allegiance. This experience suggests how the process of national consolidation, even if based on ostensibly voluntarist premises, may end up blurring the classic distinction between civic–inclusive and ethnic–exclusive nationalisms.

The idea of the nation as a moral and political entity itself creates the need to delineate members from nonmembers. In theory, principles of delineation may be somewhat fluid and include, for example, an exit option. In practice, such openness tends to work against the emotional resonance and political util-

²⁰ Jacques Godechot, ed., *Les Constitutions de la France depuis 1789* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), p. 34, author’s trans.

²¹ For example, Honoré-Gabriel Comte de Mirabeau insisted in a speech to the National Assembly that “there exists but one sole principle of government for all nations, I mean by that their own sovereignty.” Quoted in *Gazette nationale ou le moniteur universel*, *Assemblée Constituante* 4, No. 142, session of May 20, 1790, p. 418, author’s trans.

ity of nationalist platforms. Nationalist leaders may feel that pure voluntarism is simply not enough to hold the nation together and to guarantee support for their control of the state. For a nation to establish a credible claim to its own exclusive territory and political institutions (or for credible claims to be made in its name), it must be robust and to some extent self-sustaining. This presents a central challenge to voluntarist nation-based conceptions of the state.

Revolutionary leaders found themselves having to fortify their voluntarist conception of a French nation based on will with nonvoluntarist elements to preserve the resonance and viability of their nation-based claims. The most concrete manifestation of this modification on a territorial level was the idea of national self-determination as a one-way street. Once the revolutionary nation-state's parameters had been defined by those in power (ostensibly in accordance with the wishes of the people concerned), the inviolability of national unity precluded secession of a "part" from the "whole." This proposition became especially important in attempts to assert the right of all nations to determine their own political destiny (for example, for Avignon to "choose" to renounce its papal ties and incorporate itself into France), while precluding by definition the secession of any part of France. As General Jacques François Menou, reporting for the diplomatic committee on Avignon, explained:

A people that is part of a society, that is bound by a contract, cannot make itself independent except by the consent of the other contracting parts; but [a people] that composes a complete society in itself, that never formed part of any other, that [people] is free, sovereign; it can adopt as it wishes any form of government; none has the right to prevent it from doing so; for the government is only made for the governed. . . . But, it will be said, it would result from these principles that each part of the French empire could declare itself independent. I answer that no part of the French empire is actually independent by that very fact that it is part of a society with which it has contracted. . . . No part of the empire has the right to break this contract.²²

By equating the French people with a nation that was by definition unified and internally cohesive, revolutionary leaders sought to preclude the possibility of internal threats to their own political supremacy, quickly developing mechanisms to suppress and excise those that did emerge. The indivisibility of sovereignty reinforced the indivisibility of the nation, the entity said to possess it. And, in a twist characteristic of the Revolution, that indivisibility, that imperative of unity, and that automatic self-legitimation were claimed by the leaders of the (re)constituted state once it had been affirmed, or they had defined it, as national. The circle of self-validation closed once again.

²² *Gazette nationale ou le moniteur universel, Assemblée Constituante* 8, No. 121, session of April 30, 1791, pp. 264–265, author's trans.

Beyond the exclusionary criteria for membership based on political ideology, a cultural definition of the nation also emerged to bolster the nation's claim for entitlement to political self-expression in state institutions. These two sets of criteria—ideological and cultural—were related. For example, attempts to enforce linguistic uniformity became a central means of promoting and disseminating the new regime's policies, especially in rural areas that risked becoming counter-revolutionary enclaves under the influence of priests who refused to swear allegiance to the French constitution.²³ Language became an essential tool for forging unity and concretizing identity. As the Revolution progressed, policies of linguistic homogenization reinforced the importance of cultural similarity alluded to by some prerevolutionary definitions of the nation but until then subordinated to territorial and administrative conceptions.

The French language became both constitutive and emblematic of political and cultural solidarity. Its use became an essential marker of and medium for French national identity, blurring the distinction between voluntarist and non-voluntarist nations.²⁴ The utility of a common language to the formation and articulation of a shared political will led to the promotion of linguistic uniformity. But the French language acquired much more than purely instrumental importance. It became emblematic and constitutive of national identity itself. The centrality of language to identity-formation ultimately trumped the acceptance of cultural pluralism and the individual right to choose one's own linguistic and cultural ties.

The ostensibly voluntarist French nation therefore sought more substantive and permanent foundations that began to point toward a more restrictive and even essentialist definition of membership. In an ideal civic nation, voluntarism becomes a platform for a sense of identification and loyalty, with common participation, or at least representation, acting as a social and political cement. The question of whether or not pure voluntarism, with or without an "exit option," is strong enough to define and sustain an autonomous political unit remains contentious. The revolutionaries clearly felt that more was needed, as evidenced by their promotion of strict language policies and quasi-religious rituals that invoked common historic ties and a shared destiny among the French

²³The "Civil Constitution of the Clergy" in 1790 suppressed religious orders and required all priests to swear an oath of allegiance to the nation, the king, and the constitution. The refusal of many to do this created a profound division within the clergy and more generally within France.

²⁴See Abbé de Grégoire, "Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française," 16 prairial, year II; reprinted in H. de Certeau, D. Julia, and J. Revel, eds., *Une politique de la langue. La République française et les patois: L'enquête de l'Abbé Grégoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 300–317; and Bertrand de Barère, "Rapport du comité de salut publique sur les idiomes," 8 pluviôse, year II; reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 291–299.

people.²⁵ This perceived need for strong bonds among a nation's members, captured in the paradox of composition, continues to plague attempts to develop viable models of inclusive civic nationhood today.

Confrontation: How to Interact with Other Political Units?

The paradox of confrontation evokes the challenges faced by French revolutionaries in their attempt to implement a universalist nationalism during the revolutionary wars of the 1790s—that is, to spread the revolutionary ideals of national sovereignty and national self-determination in Europe. They did this through a policy of territorial annexation and the creation of virtual satellite states with French administrations in areas of Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, and even Italy.²⁶

The revolutionary conception of international society embodied the classic and enduring tension between cosmopolitan and nationalist visions and between the idea of a single human family and the notion of the nation as a self-enclosed moral and political unit. The revolutionary attempt to spread France's own model of national self-determination as a universal ideal was particularly antagonistic and destabilizing in eighteenth-century Europe, which was composed of monarchical states.

The revolutionary reconception and reconstruction of the French nation-state had direct implications for foreign policy and international relations in at least three ways. First, the revolutionaries saw their principles as relevant not only to the French nation, but also to humanity as a whole, compounding the implicit challenge the French example posed to the legitimacy of all European monarchies. Second, on a more active level, the French deemed themselves empowered to act on behalf of European peoples whose freedom was compromised by constitutional arrangements that failed to recognize their sovereignty and rights. Third, the revolutionary conception of international society that flowed from its domestic constitutive principles required the creation of a world of sovereign peoples unencumbered by the despotism of existing states—a world the revolutionaries charged themselves with creating, when not by invitation, then by military force.

The principle of national sovereignty at the heart of the revolutionary vision was fundamentally at odds with the level of interference required by France's self-appointed liberationist mission, revealing the connection (and the potential conflict) between principles of constitution and patterns of confrontation. Inspired

²⁵ See, e.g., *Confédération nationale, ou récit exact et circonstancié de tout ce qui s'est passé à Paris, le 14 juillet 1790, à la Fédération* (Paris: Garnery, 1790).

²⁶ See Jacques Dehaussy, "La Révolution française et le droit des gens," in *Révolution et droit international* (Paris: A. Pedone, 1989), p. 96.

by a conviction in the moral unity of humankind, the revolutionaries clung to their emancipatory project, while handling its contradictory implications in ingenious but often pernicious ways.

As suggested previously, the cornerstone of revolutionary political theory was the idea of the nation as the source and first holder of sovereignty, separate from and prior to both the king and the state. Within France, the National Assembly drew its legitimacy from its claim to represent the French nation. The problem came when it and its successors pursued the self-appointed task of speaking on behalf of other nations, while acting to uphold their definition of their interests, based on their own “universal” standards of legitimacy and justice. The revolutionary idea of self-determination for other nations demanded political organization in accordance with a French administrative model, as well as with ideological and material support for the French war-time cause.

Revolutionary thinkers reconciled national sovereignty with the vision of a common humanity by offering a French definition of what that humanity entailed. The revolutionaries took their own struggle to be exemplary for the world as a whole. As such, being faithful to their ethical and political principles meant embracing a liberationist mission that reconciled the apparently divergent ideals of cosmopolitanism and French nationalism by defining the first as the culmination of the second. This formed the ideological basis for the exportation of French principles and institutions during the 1790s as the essence of “Revolutionary Messianism.” The revolutionaries were nationalists in championing France and universalists in upholding the French nation as the embodiment of ideals for all of humanity. The revolutionary ethos was so powerful precisely because of its ability to mobilize national sentiment around the promotion of allegedly universal values.

As some contemporaries foresaw, the seeds of imperialism were contained in even the most ostensibly liberationist rhetoric. The revolutionaries’ ideal of unity based on reason entailed a certain assumption of doctrinal and institutional uniformity, characteristic of “revolutionism” as a strand of international theory described by Martin Wight.²⁷ The perceived need for collective mobilization while facing internal and external threats transformed the assumption of uniformity into an imperative. Revolutionary ideology had an (inter)nationalist ontology (international society composed of distinct nations), a cosmopolitan morality (with those nations joined by bonds of “fraternity,” based on ideals of liberty and equality), and universalist ambitions (concerned with spreading and implementing the revolutionary interpretation of liberty, equality, and fraternity domestically and internationally). The revolutionary case is instructive

²⁷ Martin Wight, in Gabrielle Wight and Brian Porter, eds., *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (London: Leicester University Press, 1991), pp. 8–12.

as a universalist nationalism based on cosmopolitan ideals, with echoes in liberal universalism today.²⁸

Although expansionist enterprises on the part of revolutionary France led to rampant disillusionment with French ideals among occupied populations, this did not entail rejection of national self-determination as a whole, but only of the French version of it. In fact, the French occupation and creation of virtual satellite states prompted local populations to draw on, consolidate, and even romanticize their own indigenous identities and traditions as a bulwark against French influence. This is the paradox or contradiction that arises in the attempt to implement a universalist doctrine of national self-determination. As long as the French insisted that neighboring nations “determine themselves” exclusively in France’s own image, their posture as self-styled liberators was bound to undermine itself and appear naively hypocritical, if not intentionally duplicitous. The French revolutionary rhetoric of liberation and national self-determination did indeed imprint itself on political discourse and on the popular imagination. Yet these ideas were more likely to be used against France than for it, in an act of ideological appropriation that foreshadowed the dynamic of twentieth-century anticolonial movements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The study of the French Revolution summarized above was prompted by a desire to establish a historically grounded foothold in the morass of assumptions and expectations that are embedded in the nation–state principle. The paradoxes of conception, constitution, composition, and confrontation are derived from this historical analysis but are also designed to serve as a framework for analyzing and evaluating other nation-based claims. Each paradox highlights a valuable use of the idea of the nation as a platform for political liberation in an international society composed of distinct, self-governing political and territorial units. But each benefit entails a corresponding warning that should form part of any inquiry into the legitimacy of claims on the part of actual or would-be nation–states.

The paradox of conception highlights the importance of being able to appeal to the governed as the source of political authority, especially as a basis for challenging authoritarian rule. Strong versions of this argument go beyond merely demanding popular participation in government and actually posit the theoretical and factual existence of a prepolitical nation whose consent is required to

²⁸For an expanded account of this phenomenon, see Chimène Keitner, “War and Nationalism in the French Revolution: The Theoretical and Practical Challenges of Universalist Nationalism,” *ASEN Bulletin*, No. 17 (1999), pp. 12–19.

legitimate the structure and exercise of governmental power. This idea becomes pivotal in claims that challenge the validity of political and territorial borders since the boundaries of “the nation” will not necessarily coincide with those of a particular state. When these boundaries conflict, appeals are often made to history (for example, long-standing title to territory and historical continuity as a distinct and previously self-governing group) in constructing a story about corrective justice to validate nation-based claims. These kinds of arguments rely on the premise that nations are ethically, conceptually, and even historically distinct from and prior to states. The presumed connection between national self-determination and ideals of independence and democratic self-governance facilitate and enhance the effectiveness of this rhetorical move.

Yet there is a danger that this idea of prepolitical nationhood will become abstract, reified, and ultimately detached from the welfare and concerns of the people it purports to encompass. The potential is magnified by the tendency of various groups and institutional actors to use claims on behalf of “the nation” as weapons in political power struggles. This leads to the paradox of constitution, which suggests how the claim to represent the people can be used both to promote and to undermine democratic rule.

Once again, the idea of the nation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is important for people to see themselves reflected in and represented by their political institutions so that they can accept the results of the political process as fair, legitimate, and binding. On the other hand, simply upholding the idea of rule by the people begs the question of *which* population is the appropriate referent for establishing the territorial and demographic parameters of legitimate governance and *how* best to institutionalize popular self-determination so imagined.

The principle of one person, one vote is valid only if constituents perceive themselves as sufficiently united so that they will accept the majority decision on any particular issue as legitimate and binding. The legitimacy of majoritarian rule depends on the ability of the minority to become the majority, or for a given individual to be part of either the minority or the majority, depending on the issue at hand. This possibility presumes some uniformity in basic political and social values so that no particular subset of the population is categorically relegated to minority status and all members of the polity are able to participate in and influence the outcome of political decisions.

The political challenge of nationhood in multinational states stems from the conviction that the members of a nation have so much in common that they will inevitably identify themselves as a permanent subset of the larger state population, negating the preconditions of democratic legitimacy outlined above. The nation–state principle in its pure form precludes the need to address the problems of “deeply divided” societies precisely because national and state boundaries are presumed congruent by definition. The simultaneous discrediting of assimilationism and the reluctance to endorse secession among “liberal”

approaches to this issue create an urgent need to find acceptable and effective ways of fostering cohesion, compliance, and commitment in multinational states. These problems are insufficiently recognized and cannot be addressed adequately within the enduringly (if often implicitly) nation–statist terms of many academic and political debates.²⁹

Such concerns lead directly to the paradox of composition as another site of political contestation in the French Revolution and today. The United States prides itself on being an open and inclusive model of citizenship based on common allegiance to a set of political principles (albeit an increasingly contested one). Yet its abysmally low voter turnout rates, intergroup violence, literal walling-off of private communities, and formation of militaristic anti-government organizations testify to a worrisome lack of social cohesion and commitment to a common political project.

The exclusionary potential of ethnic nationhood seems clear and acknowledges its susceptibility to abuse as a basis for state authority and legitimacy. But even (and perhaps especially) in nonethnically based states, there remains an important need to harness or create some kind of social glue among citizens and some normative basis for attachment to and respect for political institutions.

Theoretically, the nation–state principle makes sense only if nations are assumed to be cohesive and somewhat unitary; otherwise, there is no apparent reason to look to nations as the normative bases for constructing territorially separate and politically independent states. Fundamental reconceptualizations of the nature of identity, territoriality, and governance may be needed, but none will succeed that do not account for the factors supporting the development of the nation–state principle and the reasons for its perversions and failures.

Even with the entrenchment of certain norms of customary international law and the emergence of concepts such as crimes against humanity and universal jurisdiction, there remain fundamental and apparently irreconcilable differences in values and perspectives among states. The process of developing an international criminal court has both demonstrated the potential for cross-boundary consensus and cooperation and painfully revealed its outer limits. Cultural diversity does not just involve tolerating visibly different languages, customs, and holidays; it requires recognizing and providing space for completely different and encompassing ways of life that, so far, continue to find their highest political expression in the aspiration for or reality of a sovereign state. Even ostensibly universal values come up against the challenge of nonnegotiable conflicts. It is futile to rely on the force of the better argument when the dialogue cannot proceed beyond what the terms of discussion are or should be.

²⁹For a related critique of proposals for “civic nationalism” and “constitutional patriotism,” see Chimène Keitner, “The ‘False Promise’ of Civic Nationalism,” *Milennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, No. 2 (1999), pp. 341–351.

The paradox of confrontation addresses this tension between universalism and particularism in the global arena, suggesting both the positive and the dangerous aspects of the (often self-appointed) quest to create a better world, generally in the image of its proponents. This observation should not lead to a blind endorsement of any practice deemed to be culturally specific, but it should encourage humility in the promotion of one's own values and a willingness to entertain the possibility that other legitimate perspectives exist. The radical disjunction between liberationist ends and coercive means will not be lost on the objects of such efforts or on third-party observers. There are no easy answers, but there are certainly attitudes and actions that make one's arguments more or less attractive to those they are designed to reach.

Although these propositions are derived from a specific study of the French Revolution, they also capture and clarify some basic intuitions about the issues at stake in adhering, wholly or partly, to the idea of an international society of nation-states.

The nation-state principle, even if allegedly outmoded, continues to provide tacit support for conflicting claims to political and territorial control in the international arena. It bolsters the normative foundations of the sovereignty of states and gives self-identified nations a powerful instrument for challenging the political and territorial status quo, based on the argument that state borders do not follow the contours of prepolitical nations. The attractiveness of the idea of state sovereignty is likely to persist in the foreseeable future, despite the proliferation of multinational and transnational organizations; in the short term, processes of "globalization" may spark a retreat into statist forms.

The appeal to a civic, as opposed to ethnic, variety of nationalism does not seem the best way to address the risk that such a retreat will lead to internal assimilation and external belligerence. Any explicit or implied appeal to prepolitical nationhood is likely to create analogous problems. Claims to national self-determination based on a theory of correcting historical injustice should be dealt with on these terms, rather than by invoking a fiction of prepolitical nationhood. Although this may entail replacing one allegedly arbitrary status quo with a previous one, it at least avoids the problem of differential citizenship in new, nation-based states that distinguish authentic members of the nation from "stranded" outsiders (for example, citizenship dilemmas in the Baltics).

How can cohesion in and commitment to existing and new polities be ensured without recourse to the idea of nationhood? The emphasis on democratic governance is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. Traditional liberal notions of majority rule are insufficient to address the relationship between identity-based minorities and majorities in multinational states. Also, Western ideas of democracy depend on economic foundations and societal understandings that are not present in many parts of the world. We should neither underestimate nor overestimate how much people have in common in our quest to imagine and implement new forms of global political life. Underestimation

may breed complacency, while overestimation may foster heavy-handed policies that create more resentment than positive change. As with most things in life, we as international theorists and practitioners would be well advised to embrace the twin virtues of flexibility and balance as we attempt to navigate this difficult terrain.

CONCLUSIONS: REDEFINING EXPECTATIONS AND ENTITLEMENTS

Just as the political possibility of secession today depends on the acceptance of national self-determination as a legitimate political goal (one recognized informally in shared sets of understandings, or formally in international law), the political paths available to the French revolutionaries were informed, if not determined, by certain conceptual limits. In the 1790s, the French Revolution met with fierce opposition by political elites in the rest of Europe, precisely because it was perceived as exporting a new standard of political legitimacy that was fundamentally at odds with prevailing monarchical and dynastic principles. In the last century, Woodrow Wilson realized the unintended consequences of his rhetorical support for national self-determination when representatives of nationalities he had never even heard of flocked to him as a champion for their separatist aspirations, demonstrating the power of ideas in grounding and fueling concrete political claims.³⁰

Given the pervasiveness of multinational states and transnational processes, the nation–state principle may strike some as having little contemporary relevance. In fact, the widespread incongruity between theory and practice makes the nation–state idea more, not less, compelling as a subject of analysis. The presumed connection between nations and states still underlies and fuels the rhetoric of national sovereignty and the propagation of nation-based claims. This dynamic is especially evident in the continued resonance of appeals to national self-determination, in which leaders of stateless nations use the assumption that nations and states should be congruent to justify demands for increased political autonomy and even independence for specific national groups. As long as the nation–state idea informs the perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and attitudes of actual and would-be international actors (whether or not it is widely corroborated by the political status quo), it will continue to shape the limits of our international political imagination by providing grounds for competing claims to power and compromising the attractiveness of alternative, non-state options.

³⁰ Woodrow Wilson, speech to the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate on August 19, 1919; in H.W.V. Temperley, *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, vol. 4 (London: Henry Frowde and Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), p. 429.

Politics is not just about the exercise of power, but also about its justification. Power can best be exercised and compliance ensured when those subjected to it believe in its legitimacy. The use of the nation as a political platform was and is more than just a rhetorical device. It is a way of mobilizing individuals by shaping their conceptions of their political entitlements and their corresponding expectations about what constitutes a cognizable grievance and what avenues are available for seeking redress. This intuitive observation, borne out by a study of the French revolutionary experience, suggests at least two possibilities for mitigating the incompatibility of conflicting political and territorial claims: first, reduce the sense of entitlement to nation–statehood built into current understandings of the international system; and second, create viable alternatives that maximize political autonomy while minimizing competition over limited resources, especially territory.

The fundamental constitutive puzzle of international society remains the question of how groups of individuals should organize and govern themselves. Conceptual frameworks like the one developed here can help isolate the tensions and assumptions implicit in various nationalist arguments and contribute to a more incisive evaluation of their foundations and potential results. In addition, the historical analysis presented above strongly suggests the need to elucidate further the relationship between the internal and external dimensions of statehood. While the barrier between “inside” and “outside” is often taken for granted by both international relations scholars and political theorists, its theoretical and practical impermeability is hardly self-evident in a dynamic, diverse, and developing world.