

Nation-building an example of outdated thinking?

Nation-building is widely held as one of the key "tasks" that await us in post-apartheid South Africa. Stellenbosch University philosopher Professor Johan Degenaar questions its validity and suggests that a more important endeavour is the creation of a democratic culture.



Prof Johan Degenaar

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AT THIS decisive stage in the history of South Africa we are told that we have entered the period of nation-building. One should not be surprised that a variety of prophets have already come to the fore with the purpose of mobilising the peoples of South Africa to join forces on behalf of the myth of the nation.

The crucial question that we have to ask in this context, however, is not how to build a nation, but whether the building of a nation is the type of endeavour we should be engaged in.

This does not mean that we should not take the vogue of nation-talk seriously. On the contrary, this discourse demands our closest attention. One should also keep in mind that our political discussions usually conceal hidden presuppositions regarding the nature of nation and nation-building.

Assumptions about what constitutes a nation are usually implicit in the points of view formulated by the participants.

This is the case whether we are talking about the preconditions of a post-apartheid society, or the inevitability of compromise

in the context of negotiation, or accommodation of individual and group rights in a new constitution for South Africa, or the polarisation of politics perpetuated by white and black extremists, or the clash between black perceptions of what counts as a liberated South Africa.

In the process of formulating some views on nation-building, I shall make use of a variety of controversial concepts such as culture, volk, people, nation, nationality, nationhood, state, etc without discussing their problematic nature.

My first advice to people who are keen on participating in the debate on nation-building is to become fully conscious of the controversial nature of the crucial terms they are using.

For the purpose of this article, I propose the following preliminary meanings: culture means the form of life of an (ethnic) community; volk (sometimes also people) is a cultural term which refers to the (ethnic) community; and nation is a political term which signifies the political consciousness of the (ethnic) community and the identifi-

cation of (ethnic) community with state power.

In this context, nationalism can be defined as the ideology of the congruence of volk and nation, ethnic community and state power, culture and the state. If we intend keeping the historical dimension of political terms in mind, we should realise that the term nation carries the burden of the meaning of the congruence of volk and state – the identity of homogeneous culture and political power.

In the South African political context, a variety of views on nation-building can be distinguished. I propose the following views as basis for discussion.

Nationalism: According to ethnic nationalism, a volk – or a people with a homogeneous culture – is entitled to self-determination, that is, identification of volk with state-power. Afrikaner nationalism is an example of this way of thinking about what makes a nation. It inevitably leads to apartheid and the exclusion of other cultures as political challengers.

This idiom also excludes the mechanical concept of nation-building in favour of the organic concept of the birth of a nation. The metaphor of the birth of a nation is the highest form of exclusivism and the hallmark of primordialism. It assumes that man is by nature a national animal.

Nationalist exclusivism applies equally to white and black nationalism. Clarity is needed on this issue in the formulation of nationalist ideals of the National Party and Conservative Party, as well as those of the ANC, the PAC and Inkatha.

South Africanism: This view of nation-building overcomes the boundaries of ethnicity, but only in a limited way since it includes a racist element. The statement of Jan Smuts can be taken as an example of this form of exclusivism: "We are going to create a nation – a nation which will be of a composite character, including Dutch, German, English and Jew, and whatever white nationality seeks refuge in this land – all can combine. All will be welcome."

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The term South Africanism is also used to refer to the perpetuation of a dominant white Western society combined with the co-optation of blacks willing to work within the system. Of late it has required a third meaning which includes all inhabitants assumed to integrate in a melting pot context.

The value of this shift in meaning is its contribution in signifying a concept of nation which at least creates the impression that it transcends the limitations of a nationalist fixation on the volk and the notion of a homogeneous ethnic culture.

Liberalism: This view assumes the liberation of the individual from encapsulation within the confines of the volk. Man is viewed not primarily as a national animal but as a rational animal. Historically it is linked with the process of modernisation and in its economic manifestation of capitalism. It furthermore assumes that economic integration of itself will facilitate nation-building by demolishing racial stereotypes and ethnic loyalties. As in the view of a broad South Africanism, liberal concepts of the nation presumes that it overcomes the limitation of the organic metaphor of the birth of a nation by introducing a mechanical metaphor of building a nation through economic force.

Culturalism: This view is constructed with the primary purpose of building a nation. Its main concern is the mobilisation of blacks on a non-violent basis of cultural pride in order to enable them, through education into cultural awareness, to compete with the dominant culture on an equal basis. The idea is to create black structures which will prepare blacks to play the crucial role in nation-building for, since the blacks are the indigenous people and constitute the majority of the population, "they should form the foundation of the nation".

According to this view, the concept of nation is closely linked to (black) culture and to the structures of that culture which form the foundation of the one nation which will eventually include "whites, coloureds and Indians". It is typical of this view that the nationalist idea of the congruence of culture and state power plays a prominent role.

Bi-communalism: This view of nation-building also represents a sensitivity towards cultural differences which explains its realistic assessment of white and black nationalism. Originally constructed as bi-nationalism, it has developed into a bi-communalism which underplays the nationalist component by paying attention to material interests. According to bi-communalism, it is impossible to build one nation in the long term without accepting the existence of two "nations" in the short term. Instead of speaking of two nations, reference is made to two communities: a white-oriented (capitalist) community and a black majority (socialist) community. It is pointed out that the first community will be intent on building a multi-ethnic nation while the ideal of the second community is a non-ethnic nation.

Socialism: According to socialism, the notion of nation-building should be approached from a different angle. Rather than utilising racial or ethnic categories, the frame of reference for nation-building should be the class struggle. Since the capitalist class has divided the nation, only the working class is capable of building a nation which includes all citizens since only the working class' interests co-incide with the good of the whole. Neville Alexander



'Creating a democratic culture lacks the romanticism of the notion of nation-building. It demands eternal vigilance, holding off gods and tyrants.'

adds to this point the important role of language as a primary characteristic of culture in creating a common culture which would facilitate a common nationhood.

Social democracy: This view shares with socialism the concern for social justice, but instead of emphasising class categories and state power, it concentrates on the mobilisation of all individuals and groups to take responsibility for social justice and the conscientisation of citizens with regard to the suffering of fellow citizens. Formulated in terms of nation-building, it is assumed that a common nationhood is created through a common concern for social and economic justice.

Authoritarianism: According to this view, the moralisation inherent in social democracy is a form of romanticism which lacks a realistic assessment of the reality of power. The building of a nation presupposes centralisation of power. The power of the state is mobilised to build a nation by imposing a common culture, by maintaining order (especially in moving away from a multi-cultural situation), by enforcing non-racial laws and by the provision of economic growth. Authoritarianism is linked to Jacobinism according to which the power of the state should be used to homogenise culture. This boils down to the imposition of the majority culture.

Patriotism: This view emphasises the di-

visive nature of all forms of ethnic nationalism and concentrates on the creation of a common allegiance to a country. Nationhood is forged by a constitution jointly decided on by representatives of all citizens and by sharing an effective common economy and common cultural symbols. It is assumed that ethnic loyalties will be overcome by an over-arching national loyalty fostered by participation in these common symbols.

Pluralist democracy: Pluralism assumes that politics is an interplay of pressures. It cultivates a respect for this characteristic of politics which entails a plurality of associations based on voluntary membership. It operates with the image of a "whole" which fosters the integrity of its parts, cultivating a diversity - encouraging people "to speak with many voices".

This pluralisation, however, undermines the concept of a common nationhood in favour of the notion of a society which allows for a plurality of associations. This implies shared values and forms of belonging which should not be subordinated to the myth of a common nationhood which informs all views of nation-building.

Typical of the approach of a pluralist democracy is that it counters both the nationalist idea of the necessity to build a nation based on the congruence of culture and political power and the notion that the

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highest political loyalty of the citizen is owed to the nation.

By positing that the highest political loyalty is due to justice, pluralist democracy overcomes the limitation historically attached to nation-talk and contributes to the introduction of a new idiom. If one assumes that conceptual change is a form of political innovation, one realises how important it is to take a new political idiom seriously.

If asked to answer the question of how to build a nation in the South African context, I could try and join the discussion by summarising the most positive aspects of the above viewpoints of nation-building. However, at this stage at least, my task as a philosopher is to invite all participants not only to look at the proposals mentioned above, but to question the validity of the paradigm at the basis of this discourse.

My contacts in Europe with political scientists and political observers of the European scene left the impression that the dominant trend is to view the nationalist paradigm as a relic of the past.

They view with trepidation, examples of nationalism in East European countries liberated from communist rule. These people are so set on reviving the myth of the nation that the positive experiences of liberation are immediately polluted by the idea of nationality which inevitably embraces the mentality of exclusivism.

Typical of this mentality is the Bulgarian slogan: "Freedom for the Bulgarians. Turks go home." The myth of nationhood is used to legitimise the contradictory fact that the reality of liberation becomes the basis of discrimination and oppression. In all such cases, freedom is interpreted nationalistically, which implies rejection of those who do not fit into the nation.

WHAT is needed in South Africa is not a concern for the building of a nation. Instead we need to create a democratic society and a commitment to tackle the most pressing problems related to political, social and economic injustices.

At this stage, my advice to fellow South Africans would be: Instead of wasting energy in trying to build a nation, rather accept the shared responsibility for creating a democratic culture.

This is a long and difficult road. It lacks the romanticism of the notion of nation-building. It demands eternal vigilance, holding off gods and tyrants whether in the form of totalitarianism (which is easily detectable), or in the guise of the myth of the nation (the voice of the people equated with the voice of God) with emotional appeals for a common nationhood.

Van Zyl Slabbert has referred to the fact that social and economic problems in South Africa have, with increasing intensity, "outstripped the capacity of the existing political framework to deal with them".

I would like to go one step further and suggest that our problems have also outstripped the capacity of the existing intellectual framework. What I propose is that we seriously ask ourselves whether the discourse of nation-building is not an example of an outdated intellectual apparatus contributing to the paradigmatic crisis in which we are involved.

MILITARY

PEACE MISSION to Lusaka

For the first time in the 30-year conflict, arch adversaries – the ANC's armed wing and members of the defence force – came together in a bid to start talking.

SHAUNA WESTCOTT was there



ONE of the most terrible and tragic crimes of apartheid has been that it has forced the finest and most idealistic of South Africans to leave home and learn how to kill.

This observation, made in another context by Albie Sachs, acquired a haunting poignancy during the conference on "The Future of Security and Defence in South Africa", which was hosted in Lusaka by Idasa and the ANC at the end of May.

For it quickly became clear that there is a strong anti-militarist tendency in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and that many of its commanders and cadres are idealists with no love of soldiering.

As MK chief of staff Chris Hani puts it, they are involved in armed struggle "out of necessity, not out of choice".

This was one of the sub-texts of the conference, which brought together an ANC/MK delegation of about 60 with a diverse "home delegation" including Citizen Force officers, "homeland" colonels, military strategists and academics, retired senior SADF officers, conscripts, ECC activists and church leaders.

The purpose of the conference, as expressed by Idasa Western Cape regional director Nic Borain, was threefold.

Firstly, it was a "peace mission". The hope was that after four days together, delegates would be able to "acknowledge their common humanity, which is the first

step to real peace".

Secondly, it was to be a forum for "exploring ways to de-escalate the conflict and to prevent tragedies like the one that accompanied Swapo's return home".

Finally, the aim was "to start the discussion about the shape and role of a future defence force".

There is no doubt that the conference went a long way to achieving those goals, and this is reflected in the unanimous statement issued at its conclusion, which spelled out consensus on a number of important issues.

Among these were that:

- * A mutually binding "cessation of hostilities" between contending military forces should be negotiated;

- * MK should return to South Africa as soon as negotiations allow and should be permitted to use SADF facilities in this process;

- * The SADF, MK, the "homeland" armies and other military forces should be integrated into a new, smaller, non-racial and non-partisan professional force fully accountable to parliament;

- * Conscription should be phased out;

- * Nuremberg-type trials were "inconsistent with the spirit of negotiations" and were not on the agenda, but this should not be construed as exoneration for future atrocities.

Although the SADF declined an invitation to send a formal delegation to the con-