

# THE NATION AS A HUMAN BEING – A METAPHOR IN A MID-LIFE CRISIS?

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This text, which began as a conference paper in December 1993, has led to various reactions, including a critical one from my colleague Marianne Gullestad, herself a leading authority on the ethnography of Norway, who argued that it exemplifies some characteristic problems and predicaments associated with writing about one's own society as an anthropologist. While I sympathise with her criticism about the article being empirically loose, I remain committed to its theoretical argument. In my response to Gullestad, published in *Morgenbladet* (December 1998) I argue that the context of presentation determines the reception of texts; to the extent that this article is considered an ethnographic contribution to the study of Norway, it is execrable -- however, its main thrust is theoretical, and Norway is invoked merely as an example. Well, enough of this -- Marianne Gullestad has some good points, and I am pleased with her critical intervention. Readers of Norwegian can access a short version of her critique [here](#). Judge for yourselves!

## **The issue**

What kind of metaphor is a nation, and what are the sources of its symbolic power? In the relevant literature, the nation has been likened to a growing tree, a family or lineage, a village or homestead, a farm or an individual person. Handler (1988) cites one of his Quebecois informants to the effect that the nation is "like a friend". Like a person, the nation is endowed with a

biography by its imaginers, and it is presumed to have gone through phases of self-development,. Its past, like that of the individual, is being fashioned so as to make sense of the present, and like the ideal bourgeois individual, it is being symbolically represented as sovereign, integrated and inhabited by a soul. In the following discussion, I propose to see the high modern disintegration of the bounded, self-sustaining individual in relation to the ever-growing questioning of the nation, conceptualised as a community of culturally similar individuals with shared political concerns. I shall argue that there is an intrinsic connection between the two processes.

### **The concept of culture**

In an important recent debate over the nature of ethnicity, Yelvington (1991) defines it as a form of fictive kinship, criticising Bentley's (1987) suggestion, inspired by a reading of Bourdieu, that ethnic differences have their origin in differences of *habitus*. In Yelvington's view, the idea that ethnic identity is an aspect of *habitus* is better regarded as a "native" concept than an analytical one. Other scholars (e.g. Southall 1976, Fardon 1987; cf. Eriksen 1993c: Chap. 5) have pointed out that anthropological conceptualisations of ethnic groups, tribe etc. seem to owe more to European notions of nationhood than to the actual social boundaries and identity labels extant in the areas in question at the time of ethnographic field work. Ironically, European ideas of nationhood and ethnic identity have gradually been appropriated by the members of these "tribes", "nations" or "ethnic groups", and as a result, a social world which initially consisted of many minor, negotiable differences has increasingly developed into one consisting of but a few major and more solid ones -- those designating ethnic groups or nations and their boundaries. A traveller from Bergen to Stockholm prior to the implementation of nationalist ideology, say, in the mid-to late nineteenth century, would notice that each and every valley had its own dialect. However, he would be unable to say where the Norwegian dialects merged into Swedish ones. Today, the dialectal variation within both Sweden and Norway is much less significant, and it has also become possible to point out where the linguistic boundary goes. It follows the national boundary, and the development (from many small differences to a few major ones) is obviously connected to the standardising power of national mass

education and national mass media. Differences have become digitalised: they are now sharp and easily definable, and are seen to correspond to the red lines on the map.

A related discovery is nowadays being made in the comparative study of culture, especially regarding its use in the definite and plural form (*a* culture; cultures). The anthropological concept of culture is, in other words, shown to have the same origin as the concept of nationhood, and suffers from the same analytical shortcomings: "Cultures" are, at bottom, neither clearly bounded, essentially unchanging nor traditionally conceptualised as "cultures" in "native" representations. Today, however, reifying notions of culture are today increasingly common among the world's peoples, and this fact (like analogous facts concerning nationhood and ethnicity) has doubtless contributed to the present anthropological impasse concerning the concept of culture.

It may be the case, in other words, that the current attempts at refashioning traditional concepts of culture are more or less directly caused by the uncomfortable and intellectually difficult fact that "culture is loose on the streets" -- I refer to the politically motivated appropriation of anthropological concepts of culture by a variety of social movements. Not only have these movements -- most of them ethnonationalistic -- compromised and parodied classic concepts of culture; they have also made it difficult for outsiders to describe themselves in terms of anthropological concepts of culture since they employ the very same concepts as native terms. As Hviding remarks in a paper dealing with "indigenous essentialism" in Melanesia (Hviding 1993), his Solomon Islander informants claim, implicitly referring to ethnographic sources, that nothing would have distinguished them from other peoples in the world if it hadn't been for the fact that they had their *kastom* (cf. also Sahlins 1994). In a remarkably short time, reified and reifying ideas of historically and socially continuous cultures have moved, from being among the most central *defining concepts* of anthropology, to forming part of the *defined space* (cf. Ardener 1989) - to be accounted for, necessarily, by other defining concepts.

However, there may also be other important reasons for the presently widespread attempts to discard classic conceptualisations of culture, and they may be viewed both in relation to contemporary trends in social theory (notably the interest in semantics and deconstruction), and in relation to changes in the immediate social world itself. Could it simply be the case these days that the daily experience of anthropologists (as well as, possibly, their informants) fails to confirm the traditional notions of culture seen as a system of symbolic meaning shared by the members of a community? This is the horizon I wish to explore with direct reference to Norwegian nationhood.

The case has not been chosen arbitrarily: Norway is widely considered one of the most nationalist countries in Europe, one where the processes of cultural homogenisation and legitimation of the state through invented national symbols are generally perceived, locally and among comparativist scholars, as a unanimous success. Words referring to Norway (*Norge* and *norsk*, meaning "Norway" and "Norwegian") are, if added together, only preceded by the words "and" and "in" in the Norwegian frequency dictionary, which is based on newspaper language (Heggstad 1982). If, therefore, I succeed in arguing that Norwegian nationhood may be on the verge of collapse, there is a strong probability that this too would be true of other nations.

### **Norwegian nationhood**

Nationalism, the textbook wisdom goes, is a kind of ideology which holds that the political boundaries should be coterminous with the cultural boundaries of a given territory; in other words, that a state (a "country") should only comprise people *of the same kind* (Gellner 1983, Smith 1991; cf. Eriksen 1993c: Chap. 6). The idea of the Norwegian nation was born the moment a few people decided that (i) the area contained *a distinct culture*, (ii) the area should have political self-determination, i.e. should be a sovereign state. Neither of these assumptions were obviously or "naturally" true at the time, that is in the early decades of the 19th century. Norway had been a Danish province for four centuries, and had immediately after the Napoleonic Wars entered an imposed union with Sweden. The symbolic construction of the

nation was therefore directed towards two main targets: Denmark (the problem of cultural distinctiveness) and Sweden (the political dimension).

During the formative stages of Norwegian nationalism in the mid-19th century, Norwegian nationalists had to compete with Scandinavianists, who regarded all of Scandinavia (or at least Norway and Denmark) as a single cultural area. (Mazzini, the great Italian nationalist, would later argue that Scandinavia was really a single nation, considering the cultural similarity of Norwegians, Danes and Swedes.) The fusion of a cultural identity with a state implied in nationalism, is not in itself "natural" either, as several recent writers on the history of nationalism have reminded us (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1991, Hobsbawm 1992 and Smith 1991 being the most frequently cited ones). Before (and indeed after) the French Revolution in 1789, few states were nation-states: they were multi-ethnic states. At the court of the Ottoman empire, to mention but one example, three different languages were spoken -- Arabic, Turkish and Farsi (Persian). At the royal court in Copenhagen -- the capital of Denmark-Norway until 1814 -- German, French and Danish were used.

Nationhood is a social fact in so far as the inhabitants of an area believe in the existence of that imagined community which is proposed by the nationalists. Accordingly, they hold that they have something profound in common -- which could be described as *metaphoric kinship* -- with a great number of people whom they will never know personally. It is in this sense that the nation may be spoken of as an imagined community. It is neither more nor less "imaginary" than other kinds of communities, but it is abstract and depends on ideological justification -- it must be "imagined" by its members -- in order to exist. In the case of Norway, Norwegianism would eventually win out over Scandinavianism, and by now, surely, few Norwegians claim that they belong to the same nation as Danes, or Swedes, for that matter.

Nationhood need not be strongly related to "objective cultural traits", although nationalist ideology tries to persuade people that it is. So even if it could be argued that people from southeastern Norway still, in the mid-1990s,

have more in common culturally with people from western Sweden than with people from western Norway, such a similarity has little consequence in so far as people from eastern and western Norway insist that they belong to the same nation and exclude Swedes from it (cf. Eriksen 1993b).

### **History and experience**

A critical look at the historical sources of any nationalist project will quickly reveal that they are ambiguous. Norway is certainly no exception. For example, the history -- or histories -- of the Nordic region may just as well be used to justify a Scandinavian or regional identity as a Norwegian one. The history of each country is intertwined with that of the other Scandinavian countries, and at a lower level of integration, people from, say, Sunnmøre (northwestern Norway) may frequently feel that they have little in common with people from Oslo. It is only retrospectively that their ancestors could be described, anachronistically, as "Norwegians". Of course, the reified history of any community is a product of the present intending to make sense of the present and is not produced by the past. Any past contains material sufficient for the potential construction of a variety of "presents". The contemporary view of the Viking era (c. 860--1000, A.D.), for example, is quite different from the view that prevailed in the sixteenth century, and in this sense, the history of the Vikings has actually changed quite radically. Today the nation -- as a community of citizens regarding themselves as culturally similar -- depends on ideological justification in order to exist. Further, since nations are historical products, the definition of nationhood may also change. There can be no doubt that if the nineteenth-century project of a unified Scandinavian nation had succeeded, the earlier history of the region would have been written differently from the case has been; the past would have *meant* something different. There is no end to fruitfully ambiguous raw material in the past(s). In the light of continuously emerging new "presents", the past may be seen to bifurcate endlessly at innumerable points in time.

At this point, we should take notice of the analogy to individual biographies. The projected view of the nation as a metaphoric person developing through time (from an embryonic stage through infancy to maturity and on, perhaps,

to old age and death) is perfectly analogous to the classic bourgeois view of the individual as a cultural organism unfolding through time.

The question to be posed at this point is whether the idea of the nation, imagined as "inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1991: 6), still corresponds to, and helps to make sense of, the everyday experience of Norwegians. As Anderson says (1991: 5), nationalism is perhaps more appropriately likened to such phenomena as kinship and religion than to ideologies such as fascism or liberalism. In this, Anderson wishes to draw attention to the sensuous, emotional aspects of nationhood -- as does Kapferer (1988: Chap. 1), when he speaks of nationalism as a kind of ontology. What needs to be kept in mind is that such an ontology, granted that it does not form an irretrievable part of *habitus*, requires ideological justification. And for this to be successful, studies of ritual and social cohesion have taught us (e.g. Turner 1969), the ritual symbols (in this case symbols of nationhood) must not only have an effective ideological pole, but a sensuous or emotional one as well. In other words, their validity and thereby the political structure must continuously be affirmed through the everyday practice of the members of its target group for the ideology to retain its legitimacy.

Before considering the current pressure against the Norwegian concept of nationhood (i.e. the native idea of shared culture in a classic anthropological sense), another, related, aspect of nationhood must be mentioned. This is its postulate of continuity as well as potential conflict between *individual* and *society* -- an endemic feature of modern ideologies pre-eminently represented in the idea of the nation, which is, in Dumont's words, simultaneously conceived of as a collective individual and as a collectivity of individuals (Dumont 1980). It is, in many countries of today, the corporate metaphor *par excellence* -- a synonym for the societal body. When, as I shall eventually argue, the idea of the individual as "inherently limited and sovereign" collapses, the nation is doomed to follow suit, since its very conceptualisation feeds on the concept of the individual. If the individual can be shown to have several histories, so can the nation -- and the two concepts collapse simultaneously when the consequences are fully worked out.

## **The nationalisation of childhood**

In Norway as in many other countries, historians, ethnologists and writers have made important contributions to the creation of nationhood. The history of the nation is usually so fashioned as to resemble the history of an individual from childhood to maturity; the past, as mentioned above, is being reconstructed in order to make sense of the present. One important function of such myths has also been to connect the history of the nation with the history of the individual so that childhood recollections become symbolically attached to the national memory (cf. Connerton 1989: Chap. 2). Thus fond memories of experiences from childhood and adolescence are being transformed into *national* memories. The tree beneath which one first kissed becomes, in this way, a *Norwegian* tree; the parental house becomes a *Norwegian* house, and so on. One is expected to feel a profound commitment to the nation because one's childhood experiences have become nationalised: the tree, the house, the smells, the rites of passage one went through, one's parents and so on were first and foremost *Norwegian*. The biography of individuals is thus appropriated by the nation and connected to the national narrative. Personal identity becomes synonymous with national identity, and not only the genealogical past, but even the experiential past, is read through a nationalising filter.

Rituals are also important in this sense of linking personal experience, and particularly childhood experience, with nationhood. Thus, Norwegian Christmas trees are decorated not with angels, but with small Norwegian flags; the main annual public ritual, Constitution Day, is dominated by ice-cream eating children carrying little national flags; and even cross-country skiing, which is enforced upon children through school, has an explicit national content. The activity of skiing makes the children more Norwegian, and they are told that much.

Its great emotional power, and its unabashed linking up with the intimate sphere, suggests one important sense in which nationalism has more in common with kinship or religion than with, say, liberalism or socialism. This example also indicates that the stability of national myths is dependent on the



stability of childhood recollections and their connection to kin genealogy. When childhood memories become ambiguous and contestable, they are no longer able to support the objectified image of the nation. With the ongoing pluralisation of society, the shared experiences which form the foundation of the legitimacy of the nation cease to be shared. This important point will be elaborated below.

### **Contesting the past**

Critical voices have in recent years increasingly added their versions of Norwegian history to those explicitly or implicitly contributing to nation-building. The national myth of the heroic resistance of the Norwegian people during the Second World War, largely created by historians and others writing on the period, could serve as an example. Several historians have in more recent times filled in this picture with new facts and interpretations of this heroic era (for two recent contributions, cf. Dahl 1991, Sørensen 1991). For example, they have argued that Norwegian Nazis, many of whom died for their fatherland on the Eastern Front, may actually be regarded as devoted patriots. Parallels between certain aspects of Nazi politics and social democratic politics have also been pointed out. Further, it has been shown that although many Norwegians actively resisted the German occupation from 1940 to 1945, many did indeed not. In order to understand the controversial character of such new facts and reinterpretations of history, one must understand the role of the Second World War in the contemporary national definition of self. A very great number of books have been published on the war, and most of them depict Norwegian resistance as heroic. This resistance highlights sacred aspects of Norwegian nationhood: it shows the willingness of Norwegians to sacrifice their lives for their country, the importance of patriotism in times of hardship, and finally the divine destiny of the territory, as it were, as an independent country. Read diachronically as part of the nationalist script, the German occupation represented a low ebb in the development of Norwegian nationhood; it was a severe threat against the nation, where the latter eventually emerged victoriously. It is not surprising, then, that reinterpretations offering alternative perspectives on Norwegian achievements during the war can still be controversial.

Other central nationalist ideas have also been tampered with recently. The transition from the heroic age of Norwegian nationhood (notably the Viking age) to the "four-hundred years' night" under Danish rule has been rewritten by historians lacking the nationalist bias which was formerly part and parcel of the historiographical profession, and it has become possible to argue that there was no "necessary" continuity between the medieval Norwegian state and the Norwegian nation-state created in 1814, and which gained full independence in 1905. This presumed continuity, evident in the name of the king elected in 1905 (Haakon VII) suggesting that modern Norway was really the same country as the medieval kingdom, must be regarded as an ideological construction, neither more nor less. The king himself was originally a Danish prince, and spoke Danish till the day of his death.

In an important book on the doctrine of national self-determination, regrettably not available in English, the political scientist Øyvind Østerud (1984) reminds his readers that many "typical" aspects of Norwegian culture were really quite recent imports from the European continent at the time when they were discovered and fashioned as national symbols by the early nationalists. This proves true for "traditional" Norwegian handicrafts, musical instruments and folk costumes. Most of the regional *bunads*, an important type of national costume, were self-consciously invented in the early decades of the 20th century (many of them designed by writer and suffragette Hulda Garborg, the wife of the novelist Arne Garborg), and the patterns were openly inspired by costumes in continental Europe.

The very idea of Norwegian culture and society as a "natural" and stable entity evolving according to its internal laws for over a thousand years, is gradually becoming completely untenable to a growing number of people. Norwegian culture and society have developed through crucial, if sometimes sporadic, contact with continental Europe, and the changes have been dramatic. It could easily be argued that in terms of shared notions, contemporary Norwegians have less in common with the Wergelands of the 19th century (famous Norwegian nationalists) than with contemporary Germans or even Brazilians.

The "tradition" on which nationalism and national identity feeds has been deconstructed in this way, and the great tradition of nationhood is increasingly being fragmented into several lesser histories which point out the ambiguities involved in interpreting the past, and which reveal nationalist versions of history as compounds of fact, myth and interpretations which are open to discussion. With the increased influence of these counter-hegemonic interpretations of the past, it has become more difficult for the nationalists to expropriate the childhood recollections of the citizens: formerly doxic truths have been moved to the realm of opinion. And, it must be added, when it is shown in this way that the biography of the nation is negotiable, it becomes evident that so, too, is the biography of the individual citizen (and vice versa).

Since Norwegian history can be reinterpreted, the content of Norwegian collective identity can also be changed; indeed, some have argued that it may eventually collapse under the burden of an excessive and bewildering number of epicycles. This, some have argued, is even needed in our day and age, marked by two strong tendencies which run counter to currently held conceptions of the substance of Norwegian nationality. They are, in short, the emergence of a poly-ethnic Norwegian society and the globalisation of culture.

### **The effect of the minority presence**

Approximately 100,000 non-European immigrants and refugees and some 40,000 Sami comprise a small percentage of the country's population, but in recent years they have increasingly demanded formal equal rights and the acknowledgement of an official minority status. A continuous reminder that nationalist ideology does not conform perfectly with social reality, ethnic minorities constitute a thorn in the eye of many governments. Norway is no exception, and problems arising from the presence of minorities go to the naked core of nationalism seen as a cultural system: What is the actual content of the national identity; who should be included in the nation and who should be excluded from it; and what kinds of demands should be placed on inhabitants who are not, culturally speaking, members of the nation?

The Sami, that sub-Arctic ethnic group who were formerly known as the Lapps, are Norway's oldest ethnic minority. In all probability, they have lived in what is now Norway for at least as long as the Germanic-speaking tribes and their descendants, the ethnic Norwegians. Until the late 1950s, Sami identity had been strongly stigmatised, and the transhumant Sami served as a defining Other to Norwegians, who thereby could define themselves as "civilised". Many Sami living in ethnically mixed areas chose to undercommunicate their ethnic origins -- that is, they publicly pretended not to be Sami (Eidheim 1971); and to be sure, there has been considerable permanent assimilation to Norwegian identity, particularly among the coastal Sami. From the early 1960s on, but particularly since 1980, the country has seen the growth of a powerful ethnic revitalisation movement investing pride and dignity into the formerly despised Sami identity; they have taken self-conscious measures to glorify and re-codify half-forgotten Sami customs, while at the same time making certain that they receive their share of the national welfare. This ethnopolitical movement has enjoyed considerable success. The Sami language, threatened by extinction as late as the 1960s, has been revived, and it is now the main administrative language in those parts of Finnmark county which are defined as Sami core areas. Substantial government subsidies ensure that Sami literature is published, and national radio provides a certain measure of programming in Sami. In 1989, a Sami parliament with limited but real power, *Sametinget*, was inaugurated by the late Norwegian King Olav V.

The fact that the Sami achieved political, cultural and linguistic rights within the institutional framework of the Norwegian nation-state also indicates that there need be no serious conflict between an ethnic majority and a minority living in the same country. However, the avoidance of conflict seems to require that the minority is granted cultural self-determination in respects defined as important by its leaders. This may entail demands for religious and linguistic rights that may not be accepted by the nation-state, which for its part proclaims the essential cultural homogeneity of its inhabitants. Indeed, if we look at the more recent immigrants to Norway, it becomes evident that the rights successfully claimed by the Sami are not automatically granted by a

national majority. During the election campaign of 1991, for example, leading politicians in Oslo suggested that immigrant children should be deprived of the right to be taught in their mother-tongue in primary schools, and strong political lobbies fought for years against the building of a mosque in the city, although Muslim organisations were willing to fund it themselves.

The overtly anti-immigrant groups, some of which are openly racist, are numerous but small and politically marginal in the country. However, suspicion, fear and myths abound, especially targeting Muslim immigrants (who make up around one per cent of the population). Many Norwegians exaggerate their numbers if asked; many believe that Muslim women have an average of ten children each; there is a widespread idea to the effect that all Muslims are "fundamentalists", and so on. In general, the very presence of Muslims in the country is seen as a threat against Norwegian identity by some zealous patriots, who reject that "mix of cultures" presumed by migration, and who would prefer that Norwegian society conformed firmly to nationalist doctrine; namely, that it should only comprise people "of the same kind".

In the 1990s, it is possible for a person to identify him- or herself both as a Sami and a Norwegian. It is so far much less common for a person to identify him- or herself as a Pakistani-born Muslim and at the same time as a Norwegian, even if the person in question is a Norwegian citizen. The idea of Norwegianness, as it is produced and reproduced in public discourse, appears incompatible with Islam.

Perhaps the future will see an increasing polarisation between Norwegians and immigrants; perhaps many of them will leave, or perhaps many will be assimilated. It is, however, also quite conceivable that the Asian, African and South American immigrants and refugees will succeed along the same lines as the Sami; that they will be able to assert their minority identity while simultaneously becoming integrated into Norwegian civil society. In this case, classic nationalism based on notions of cultural similarity and shared descent may have to be abandoned.

### **Globalisation and the implosion of cultural differences**

The relationship between *isolation* and *contact with others*, or introverted and extroverted tendencies, is highly ambiguous in Norwegian history as in the history of any European country. The relative isolation of the society, which among other things entailed the absence of a powerful landed gentry after the Black Death (1348--50), has clearly had substantial effects on its ideology, social organisation and self-definition. On the other hand, Norwegians are also proud of their large merchant fleet (which, it is sometimes claimed, can be traced back to the Viking age), and during the past century, Norwegians have apparently been a very extroverted people; they are well-travelled, have sent off a great number of Protestant missionaries to Africa, India, the Far East and Madagascar, and are among the strongest supporters of the United Nations. Through incoming migration, Norwegian society has come closer to the rest of the world in a different way; it has been confronted *at home* with customs and beliefs radically different from the endemic ones.

In another sense, too, Norwegian society is much less sheltered from the rest of the world than it used to be. This concerns the globalisation of culture; the spread, through modern media of mass communication, of symbols, images and messages which know of no national or cultural boundaries, and which are dislodged from the spatial dimension, or, to use Giddens's term, disembedded. Ours is the era of the jet plane and the satellite dish. The world has shrunk, and some of its internal boundaries are vanishing. The impact of globalisation on Norwegian identity -- leading as it is to an increased tension between homogenisation and fragmentation, between isolation and integration -- has been described at length in my recent collection of essays on culture in Norway (Eriksen 1993a; cf. also Eriksen 1993b). The main point here is that globalisation (and the accompanying, reflexive localisation), along with the increased visibility of cultural minorities, creates an acute crisis in the traditional depiction of the nation as historically continuous and culturally homogenous.

In the face of technological change and the fact that formerly discrete societies have become intertwined, it would seem difficult to maintain the idea of a bounded, historically continuous Norwegian culture. Since processes of cultural homogenisation relativise cultural differences, and since increased geographical mobility severs the connection between territories and "cultures", one might expect the distinctiveness to vanish gradually. At a certain level, such an "implosion" of cultural difference is doubtless taking place. Like virtually every other prosperous ethnic group in the world, Norwegians nowadays watch Sylvester Stallone on FilmNet and Madonna on MTV; the pizza has become a local staple; an Oslo flat may be furnished and decorated in the same way as a flat in Milan or Berlin, and so on. In terms of consumption and lifestyle, there is less and less to distinguish Norwegians from any other Western European people.

On the other hand, as is well known from the literature on ethnicity, cultural self-consciousness and concerted delineations of boundaries may actually be a more or less direct outcome of an ongoing process of cultural homogenisation. As a general rule, it is when the self-professed carriers of an identity feel that it is threatened from the outside that it becomes most important to them. To the Norwegian farmer of the 1840s, there was no reason to define his social identity. He felt no obligation to ask questions about who he was. To people living in modern, complex societies, the situation is quite different. Their way of life is different from that of their forebears, but the feeling of a continuity with the past may still remain important. They are now constantly brought into contact with people whom they define as different (foreigners, immigrants, etc.), and are thus brought to reflect on their identity. They must be able to explain *why* they describe themselves as Norwegians and not as Swedes, Pakistanis, etc. Furthermore, the shrinking of the world imposed by globalisation seems to lay pressure on their identity as something distinctive: the old and familiar is replaced by the new and foreign and seems to threaten one's uniqueness. In this way, the pressure from cultural complexity and globalisation is at the root of the modern identity crisis, where ethnic identification and the concomitant politicisation of culture are often seen as solutions in the face of the disappearance of boundaries (cf. Friedman 1992).

As Anglicisms enter the language, new shopping malls with enormous car parks replace the old family-run groceries, and the video machine replaces the storytelling grandmother, the individual may react by reaching towards that which seems constant and secure in a sea of accelerating change: the nation, seen as a pseudo-Gemeinschaft, a metaphoric family or a metaphoric individual, often becomes the focus of such longings. This process of cultural nation-building, I shall argue, is nonetheless soon coming to an end simply because too many everyday experiences fail to fit the model expected to account for them. However, globalisation and the minority presence do not by themselves lead to the dissolution of national identity: on the contrary, they may contribute to its revival, at least in the short term.

Changes in the mass media situation are also important and need to be mentioned, however briefly. As is well known, Anderson (1991) and several other theorists of nationalism (e.g. Karl Deutsch) have stressed the importance of mass communication in the development of shared representations and subjective nationhood. In the second edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson has added a chapter on maps, which can be seen as excellent condensed symbols of the nation. The map shows the nation as a fixed entity, as an abstraction (a product of imagination), and inhabitants are taught its contours daily through the national educational system and mass media. Every classroom has a map of Norway in front of the blackboard, which can be rolled down whenever necessary. Until recently, further, the majority of Norwegians had access to only one TV channel. The most widely seen programme was, as in many countries, the evening news. Immediately following the news, the national weather forecast served as a daily reminder of the geographical extent of the nation; most of the households were told of the weather in distant areas, but no mention was made of the weather in neighbouring countries. The weather map itself showed only Norway. Since the mid-1980s, however, cable television and the emergence of private Norwegian television channels have destroyed this hegemonic situation. No longer is everyone compelled to follow the same programmes, and different households increasingly relate to different discourses. The daily weather map is no longer seen by the majority of households. The consequences may not be



dramatic, but this development fits well with the other changes mentioned, and certainly adds to the impression of cultural fragmentation. The "overarching cultural categories" of Norwegian society, accurately defined by Marianne Gullestad (1992) as "categories which are used to justify without themselves needing justification" (Gullestad 1992: 140), are, as a consequence, becoming less doxic. Popular debates about "what is typically Norwegian" reveal a growing reflexivity and analytical distance to phenomena such as "peace and quiet" (*fred og ro*; Gullestad's example), "going for a walk" (*å gå tur*), cross-country skiing (which is codified as a national activity) and other notions and practices formerly considered self-evidently shared and therefore scarcely considered at all.

### **The adaptability of indigenous essentialism**

The cultural differences of the world were for a brief period in the 20th century regarded, by anthropologists and others, as spatial, demographically fixed and historically stable. They have by now reached a point of theoretical implosion. It is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold the idea of the nation as an "inherently limited and sovereign" state founded on shared culture. I have mentioned several tendencies which, taken by themselves, might suggest the imminent breakup of the Norwegian nation, which in a European context is, if anything, more homogenous and less problematic to justify vis-a-vis its inhabitants than most other nations. Notably, I have mentioned the growing questioning -- by erstwhile nation-building disciplines like history and ethnology -- of official myths of origin, the widely perceived creolisation and differentiation of ideas, identifications and ways of life, the discovery of cultural minorities and their assertion of specific cultural rights within the compass of the nation-state. In addition, we could mention other, no less important and no less widespread processes such as the globalisation of capital (which seems to turn nationalism into a form of "false consciousness" in a Marxian or left-Hegelian sense) and the globalisation of political issues (which seems to make nationalism obsolete as a political project). These kinds of development, familiar to any contemporary anthropologist working in a complex society, do not, nevertheless, call for a strong revision of the concept of culture. It would suffice to add a few extra

epicycles in a more or less Parsonian manner; add a mitigating concept of differentiation, one of relationality with respect to identification, and one of change -- and the concept of culture as shared meaning at the level of a community of individuals remains more or less intact. Clifford Geertz himself, the main proponent of the "culture as shared meaning" notion in anthropology, has suggested that perhaps culture is less tightly integrated than he formerly held; in other words, it is integrated like an octopus rather than like a fugue by Bach (Geertz in Shweder 1984).

As we have seen, moreover, the *native* concepts of culture as a thing and of the nation as a bounded community are alive and kicking more than ever before, and indeed they sometimes seem to be inversely related to actual cultural uniformity and stability. For this reason, Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion to the effect that nationalism is in the throes of death is less than convincing, given his argument. In the second edition of his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, published after the break-up of the USSR and Yugoslavia, Hobsbawm (1992: Chap. 6), intriguingly, is actually even more insistent than earlier in prophesying nationalism's imminent decline. His reasons are purely instrumentalist: since nationalism will not do as a tool for rational governance, it will eventually have to go. Although the future may prove Hobsbawm right, it is at present difficult to see his optimistic linkage of ideology with reason confirmed in contemporary identity politics anywhere in the world. Voltaire said of the Holy Roman Empire that it was "neither holy, Roman nor an empire"; with respect to the Norwegian nation-as-a-human-being, it could be said that it is neither limited, sovereign nor integrated. In addition, I shall now argue, its symbolic relationship to the individual is becoming problematic since the integrated bourgeois individual is increasingly a creature of the past.

### **The individual -- no longer "inherently limited and sovereign"**

My own main argument, although it leads to a conclusion similar to Hobsbawm's, follows a different line from his. Rather than focusing on the political shortcomings of nationalism, I would argue that its *emotional* impact is becoming difficult to maintain because a central source of its symbolism is

about to disappear in many societies, including Norway: the bourgeois individual, the integrated person with his or her "value-orientation", stable "personal identity" and sense of continuity with the past as well as the surrounding society. Although many social theorists have by now proclaimed the "death of the individual", the empirical evidence is still frequently absent (as in Giddens), whimsical (as in Baudrillard) or difficult to understand (as in Strathern). Yet there are good reasons for believing that the ongoing implosion of cultural differences and the concomitant explosion of new communication technologies, to mention but two of the most important features of this era, have profound and lasting effects on the concept of the individual. It is here, in the cultural construction of the person, and not in the "objective" changes of cultural boundaries and content, that the battle over political identifications is being fought. Globalisation and the collapse of history as a single master narrative contribute to this development, but it should primarily be understood in its own terms, from within. It is certainly no coincidence that the most characteristic literature of our era thematises uprootedness, exile and creolisation and that some of the most important imaginative writers, at least in the English language (for example V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, but also French-language writers like Patrick Chamoiseau) write from a creolised vantage-point. Homi Bhabha's celebrated essay "DissemiNation" opens with the confession that although his title owes something to Jacques Derrida (himself an "uprooted" Jewish  *pied-noir*), it owes something more to his own experience of migration. "I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering" (Bhabha 1990: 201). On the other hand, it has been argued that this kind of concern is characteristic of a certain breed of intellectuals but not of contemporary societies as such. Of course, most citizens do not possess the vocabulary and conceptual framework of a Bhabha, a Todorov or a Bauman, but it can be shown not only that the experience of post-individualism is not confined to middle-class intellectuals, but also that institutional changes can be identified which contribute to explaining this situation.

The collective orientation of pre-bourgeois societies once gave way to the individualism of early modernity; now, it seems appropriate to suggest, this development continues and we are left with a social space of *dividuals* (Strathern 1992a) who tend to conceive of themselves in relational and dynamic terms. Because of an obsolete epistemology, social research has largely failed to identify these processes. Comparing the present situation with ideas of "integrated, stable individuals in societies", conservative theorists may label the current situation as one marked by "uprootedness", "anomie", "differentiation" etc. -- using concepts firmly embedded within the parameters of the individual- society dichotomy (cf. Ingold 1989). Research on phenomena such as multi-channel television, consumption, serial monogamy, large-scale migration and youth culture in European cities nevertheless suggests (albeit usually implicitly) that the old dichotomy between individual and society, and thus the old idea of the nation as a collective individual, may be breaking down simply because the bounded and self-determining individual is being transformed into a set of potential relationalities, a chameleon, an "onion", to paraphrase Ibsen's Peer Gynt, "layer upon layer but no core". The branching out of the nation's past into several possible pasts, described above, runs parallel to the discovery that people, too, have several possible pasts. (It is never too late to acquire a happy childhood, just as it is never too late to acquire a glorious history.) A related argument is represented in Strathern's work on the new reproductive technologies (1992a, 1992b), where she argues that parenthood and notions of the family as a natural entity are threatened and that, as a consequence, both individual and society vanish. A main metaphoric source for the nation, in other words, is under threat.

### **Some implications**

This argument has many possible implications. First, and most obviously, social theory must move -- and indeed does move -- towards relational and processual perspectives, endorsing programmatic statements such as Leach's old remark to the effect that the smallest "unit" studied by social anthropologists is the dyadic relationship -- or, slightly more radically, supporting Bateson's acquaintance whose car carried a bumper sticker saying "Down with nouns!" (Bateson 1972). Secondly, by implication, culture must be

-- and again, is being -- rethought as process and as a prerequisite for communication rather than as a field of shared meaning. Thirdly, anthropology seems to assume a new political responsibility in this situation: rather than preaching the gospel of cultural relativism, anthropologists now become engaged in the task of disengaging ideologies which reify culture (which are, incidentally, frequently inspired by cultural relativism) from the political sphere. The field of social relations itself -- rather than the opposition between individual and society and, by metaphoric extension, the opposition between the nation and foreign nations -- will have to be the starting point of enquiry.

What of the nation? The very fact that people discover that identities can be negotiated -- they learn to see themselves as relational -- casts doubt on its future as a cultural source of "natural emotions". The deconstruction of the nation and the dissolution of the individual are mutually reinforcing processes. And at this point, it is easy to agree with Hobsbawm that the future of the nation is really very uncertain and that current ethnonationalistic revitalisation movements -- from the Solomon Islands to Norway -- may be plausibly seen as desperate expressions of death throes. If the nation dies, this will among other things strengthen the relevance of the metaphor of the nation of the human being, since people have to die.

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