Territorial Identity in Europe: the Political Processes of the Construction of Identities in Corsica, the Basque Country, Italy, Macedonia and the Swiss Jura

BERNARD VOUTAT

Jean-Louis Briquet, *La tradition en mouvement. Clientélisme et politique en Corse* (Paris: Belin, 1997), 303 pp. ISBN 2–701–12079–9.

Barbara Loyer, *Géopolitique du Pays basque. Nations et nationalismes en Espagne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 416 pp. ISBN 2–738–45089–X.

Carl Levy, ed., *Italian Regionalism. History, Identity and Politics* (Oxford/Washington, DC: Berg, 1996), 197 pp. ISBN 1–859–73156–2.

Peter Mackridge and Eleni Yannakis, eds., *Ourselves and Others. The Development of a Greek Macedonian Cultural Identity since 1912* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 1997), 259 pp. ISBN 1–859–73138–4.

Claude Hauser, *Aux origines intellectuelles de la Question jurassienne. Culture et politique entre la France et la Suisse romande (1910–1950)* (Courrendelin: Editions communication jurassienne et européenne (CJE), 1997), 528 pp. ISBN 2–940–11204–5.

I

Any examination of political movements that claim a basis in territorial and cultural identity tends to come up against a major obstacle, the problem of tracing the reasons for their emergence. There are two competing approaches: the 'culturalist', which considers cultural differences among communities as being themselves the chief cause of conflict; and the 'instrumentalist', which holds that those differences are exploited and manipulated by individuals or groups seeking to acquire or maintain a position of power.

This opposition, which inevitably emerges in literature dealing with the 'national question',[1] arises from diverging concepts of society and the way that social actors

[1] In French, this opposition is very well described in an article published some time ago by Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'identité et la représentation', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 35 (1980), 63–72. There is also a useful survey of research on the subject in C. Jaffrelot, 'Les modèles explicatifs de

Contemporary European History, **9**, 2 (2000), pp. 285–294 © 2000 Cambridge University Press
Printed in the United Kingdom

move within it. Is the existence of a 'nation' an empirically verifiable fact, a manifestation of some objective constant of human society – viz. the existence of cultural differences, most obviously those of language? Or should it be considered the result of a specific representation of the divisions within human societies, which, historically, has been embodied in various forms of nationalism? In the first case, the nation would give rise to nationalism; in the second, the reverse. This is the vicious circle in which researchers tend to become entrapped.

On the one hand, some of the research in social sciences, history, geography, anthropology and sociology have offered pertinent critiques of such concepts as 'nation', 'ethnic group', 'region' and 'race'. In particular, they have shown that these are not homogenous entities with clearly recognisable 'natural frontiers' that enable a virtually spontaneous identification of the relevant populations – although there are certain objective characteristics (language, religion etc.) which an observer may use to describe what such populations have in common and what distinguishes them from other groups.

But such criticisms will remain mechanistic, and therefore superficial, if they reduce nationalism to a mere ideology, that is a set of discourses which exploit the idea of nationality while concealing the powers and interests which largely create them. This is tantamount to evading a serious consideration of the social and historical conditions which lead to the development of a representation of nationality (whether regional or ethnic) and make such representations effective.

This means that before analysing nationalist movements it is first necessary to deconstruct the ideas employed – 'nation', 'ethnic group', 'region'. These ideas are neither purely subjective nor purely objective: they belong to the often contradictory definition of social realities. They identify divisions among human groups (among ethnic groups, or between nationals and non-nationals, minorities and majorities, etc.), and establish classifications using criteria which are more or less accepted, depending on historical and political circumstances. This is why we need to distance ourselves from such categorisations. Rather than locking ourselves into the (no doubt interminable) debate over whether the divisions that such categories express are real or illusory, it is better to look at the processes of social construction which allow those categories effectively to express divisions within the social world. This explains the importance of the historical approach which I shall define as 'constructivist', which, when understood in the broadest possible sense, has in recent years contributed to an improved understanding of the dynamics which produce a sense of identity in territorial units.[2]

l'origine des nations et du nationalisme', in G. Delannoi and P.-A. Taguieff, eds., *Théories du nationalisme* (Paris: Kimé, 1991), 138–77. For an overview of more specifically historical debates see the works of Gérard Noiriel, especially 'La question nationale comme objet de l'histoire sociale', *Genèses*, Vol. 4 (1991), 72–94.

[2] Certain authors have produced works that are classics in this domain and have contributed decisively to the renewal of debate on the national question over the last ten years: e.g. Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, John Breuilly and Benedict Anderson. A recent collection of studies, emerging from a seminar held in 1993/4 at the European University Institute in Florence, is a good illustration of the changing approach to the problematics of the 'national question': Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Michael G.

The works reviewed here do not all explicitly adopt this approach; but they all, to a greater or lesser degree, shed some new light on their subjects and on the questions I have asked in this introduction.

II

Of the works under review, that of Jean-Louis Briquet is the most closely focused on the questions just evoked. He immediately challenges a number of clichés regarding the 'Corsican question'. In the background to his study is an awareness that the last thirty years have seen an intensification of political violence linked to the 'drift towards nationalism', and a ruthless struggle on the part of various pro-independence groups. This is often seen as an anachronistic manifestation of a traditional, and exclusively Corsican, political culture of which the most visible element is vendetta. In this view, Corsican nationalism represents the refusal of a politically backward tribal society to accept modernity on the grounds that this would destroy its specific identity. In other words, the 'Corsican problem' springs from the persistence of a cultural tradition at odds with the processes of economic, political and social modernisation.

Briquet does not accept this interpretation. He sees Corsican nationalism as the specifically local result of a long historical process of modernisation, marked by a *reproduction* of the traditional dominance of the notables as, from the early nineteenth century onwards, clientelist relationships were *adapted* to the new forms of political legitimisation linked to the development of the State, and subsequently of political parties.

This approach tends to obliterate the generally accepted distinction between tradition and modernity. It means reinterpreting the very notion of clientelism, which is usually dismissed as a relic of the past and an obstacle to change. What needs to be considered is, first, the political perceptions which are assumed in client–patron relationships, and secondly, the socio-historical logic which underpins and perpetuates the power of the notables.

Briquet concludes that the sources of the crisis in Corsican society should be sought not in the repression of an existing identity, but in the strategies the notables employed in order to adapt to change. Thus Corsican nationalism is heterogeneous and covers a number of different demands, since a number of different groups, each following its own logic and with sometimes incompatible interests, all claim to represent what is specifically Corsican.

Briquet's argument is convincing, indeed exemplary. After describing the development of political registers (Part 1) and analysing the links between tradition and modernity in contemporary Corsica, he examines the strategy of the notables

Müller and Stuart Woolf, eds., *Regional and National Identities in Euroe in the XIXth and XXth centuries* (The Hague/Boston/London: Kluwer Law International, 1998). The sociological theory is discussed in a recent book by Philippe Corcuff on the 'constructivist sociologists' (Norbert Elias, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Edward P. Thompson, Harold Garfinkel, etc.), entitled *Les nouvelles sociologies* (Paris: Nathan, 1995).

(Part 2), describing the historical dynamics that led to a politicisation of the client–patron relationship. Throughout, he pays due attention to the diverse forms that were assumed, in practice, by power and the struggle for power. Such is the general structure of the work, which, though written by a political sociologist, will be of interest to historians and provide them with a good introduction to the constructivist and 'socio-historical'[3] approach to the national question.

III

Barbara Loyer belongs to a different discipline: geography, or more precisely, geopolitics. Her approach, building on the work of Yves Lacoste and the journal *Hérodote*, focuses on the analysis of territorially based power struggles. The Basque Country is an eminently suitable area for the examination of this problem. Marked by an inextricable tangle of contradictory territorial representations, it is the scene of endless disputes over the notions of identity, nation, people and sovereignty, setting Basque nationalists (themselves very divided over the concepts and political strategies implied by their self-definition) at odds with supporters of the centralised state.

Loyer's analysis of the historical and ideological background to the 'Basque problem' shows that it hinges on the formulation of legitimate criteria for subdividing the social world. Contrary to the usual assumption which is advocated by the nationalists in both camps, these criteria are not self-evident. For a start, even the territory itself is very hard to define with any precision. Some believe that the Basque Country extends into both France and Spain – a larger area than that recognised by the Spanish constitution – and corresponds to a specific nation with its own language and culture, and with 'historic rights' that have been violated by the Spanish government. Others would confine the term 'nation' to the Spanish state, which contains several different 'nationalities', each with a degree of autonomy.

This explains why the nationalist demands for full and entire sovereignty over 'Basque territory' largely rest on political interpretations of a past which was more or less exhumed and reinvented, at the end of the nineteenth century, by Sabino Arana Goiri, the founding father of Basque nationalism and the party which espouses it. This party (the Partido Nacionalista Vasco – PNV) has always seen the Basque Country as a homogenous entity which must win its independence from a Spanish state that has allegedly imposed a loss of identity and therefore become the vector of national domination.

Despite this common background, however, one of the singularities of Basque nationalism is the deep-seated internal oppositions which structure it. In the early 1990s there were no fewer than six nationalist parties, deeply divided over the

[3] This notion can be used to describe an approach that aims to combine sociology and history in the study of political objects, and so refresh that study. See Yves Deloye, *Sociologie historique du politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997). The French journal, *Genèses* (published by Belin, 1990–) is devoted to the study of 'socio-history'.

armed struggle and the objectives of the nationalist cause. The greatest virtue of Loyer's book is that it puts these divergences into perspective by relating them to the historical development of the 'Basque problem', from its first appearance at the end of the nineteenth century to the present. She pays particular attention to the civil war and the positions adopted by the nationalist movement vis-à-vis the other forces that were in play. The end of Franco's regime and the creation of democratic institutions constitute another important facet of the analysis, through which the author describes with precision the ever-shifting oppositions not only between Basque and Spanish nationalists, but also among the different strands within Basque nationalism, especially between the PNV, with its aspirations to a moderate, *posibilista* kind of autonomy, and those segments of the National Basque Liberation Movement (MLNV) which seek to reconcile doctrinaire nationalism with a Marxist analysis of Spanish society (notably Euzkadi ta Askatasuna – ETA – Herri Batasuna).

This is a very solid piece of research which has the merit of showing how the history which Loyer is recounting is in itself a major political element in the 'Basque problem'. Her method could profitably be applied to other nationalist conflicts, in support of a comparative approach to the currents of thought which they engender. It is a pity, however, that the author tends toward the descriptive and is content to detail the oppositions between contradictory representations of the territory and history of the 'Basque people', without relating them systematically to the social and historical circumstances which gave them authority and legitimacy within their own sphere. In other words, while Loyer's deconstruction of nationalist discourse is a salutary exercise, she sometimes stops halfway and skirts the very complex question of the reception – pluralistic, differentiated, shifting, but very real – of that discourse. Granted, the 'Basque Country' is an invention, but it has repeatedly been reinvented in specific circumstances which render it socially effective.

IV

The collection of essays edited by Carl Levy takes as its starting point the profound political transformation of Italy since the 1980s and the simultaneous emergence of regionalism, exemplified most strikingly by the Leagues which have sprung up in the north of the country. Each contributor focuses on some aspect of the political and cultural processes which underlie the formation of regional identities in Italy. The book, which is prefaced by an interesting introduction and synthesis by the editor, is in two parts, each containing four contributions. The coherence and homogeneity of the whole is striking, both from the theoretical viewpoint and in the logic followed by the various authors.

The first part, historical in orientation, deals with the construction of regional identities in Italy from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. The focus of examination is the intersection of various principles for the construction of identity (local, regional and national), in the building of the Nation-State.

In recent years the Leagues have been insisting that regional identities (especially in Lombardy and the Veneto) were never completely eradicated; a number of

contributors challenge this teleological approach to the regionalist phenomenon, showing how fragile such identities really were in northern and central Italy until quite recently, struggling as they were under the combined effects of the industrial revolution and the consequent influx of migrants. This reading leads to a change of perspective on the 'question of the Mezzogiorno', whose proponents long assumed that the south of Italy was culturally homogenous and difficult to integrate into the Nation-State. In fact, the relevant chapter in this book shows how difficult it is to draw a clear boundary between the 'north' and 'south' of Italy. During the whole of the period under consideration, the south has never had a regionalist movement based on ethno-linguistic criteria. In this context the author discusses the cases of Sicily and Sardinia. Both regions have a distinct socio-cultural context and have certainly produced some fledgling regionalist protest movements, but these were not grounded principally in ethno-linguistic considerations. It appears that in the north, too, demands with an ethno-linguistic basis are very recent, except in some peripheral regions such as the French-speaking Val d'Aosta, the German-speaking Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli. In this context the chapter on language varieties in Italy is of interest in several ways. First, it points out that modern Italian actually developed out of Tuscan in obedience to a clear policy of propagating monolingualism. This policy, which finally proved successful, was damaging to the numerous other languages (or regional dialects) spoken in the country[4] – and which the militants in the Leagues are now exhuming as part of their challenge to the centralised state. The cases of Valle d'Aosta and the Trentino-Alto Adige paradoxically reveal that the language question is chiefly to be seen as part of a political thrust towards constructing and imposing principles of classification within the national territory, in that the standardised French and German advocated by the regionalists are quite unlike the Franco-Provençal and Bavarian actually being spoken in those areas at the dawn of the Nation-State.

The second part of the book concentrates on recent times, in the light of previous comments. The authors examine the functioning of the political institutions which were set up after the Second World War to further local government and decentralisation as mitigating ethnic and regional tensions in Italy; they also examine the more recent emergence of the League phenomenon in the north (Lombardy and the Veneto). Their conclusion is that there is a considerable gulf between the special autonomy that has been granted to five regions in particular (Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Sardinia, Sicily and Friuli) and those elements in the discourse of the Leagues that envisage a kind of federalism not far removed from separatism. The authors distinguish the particular circumstances which have produced this radicalisation of the Italian 'regional question', a kind of conservative revolution originating in part from a fiscal revolt, rooted in turn in a profound crisis in political institutions at the end of the 1980s. The authors are clear that this is a phenomenon

[4] The reader may notice a similarity to Eugen Weber's studies of France, which have highlighted the linguistic policy of the centralised state throughout the nineteenth century, aimed at imposing 'educated' French at the expense of local dialects. Eugen Weber, *La fin des terroirs. La modernisation de la France rurale 1870–1914* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

which will have a considerable effect on the balance of political power in Italy and will leave the northern communities subject to the temptation to turn inwards and contemplate secession.

V

Like the works already mentioned, *Ourselves and Others*, edited by Peter Mackridge and Eleni Yannakis, is directly concerned with contemporary events, in this case the 'resurgence of the Macedonian question' after the Greek government refused to recognise the 'Republic of Macedonia' that was proclaimed after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Not only did the Greeks refuse to accept the name of the new republic (which is now formally recognised as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), they also rejected the idea that they had a Macedonian minority within their own borders, fearing that this would lead to territorial demands from the new-born state. Against this background, the book examines the development of a Macedonian cultural identity since the Balkan War of 1912, when Macedonia, formerly a province of the Ottoman Empire, was divided between Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.

Macedonia is, of course, an interesting case because it is a virtual paradigm of an area in which populations with different languages, religions and cultures live side by side. Their division between three different states further complicates the construction of national identities, which are necessarily based on local and regional identities, as is clear from the example of 'Greek' Macedonia.

The book has an introduction and three parts. The first comprises four contributions examining the historical development of conflicts of identity, focusing on the period immediately before and after the Balkan wars. The second (another four contributions) takes an anthropological approach to identity, with particular stress on cultural factors. The third (five contributions) concentrates on the emergent literary tradition and examines its place in the cultural representations of Macedonian identity.

The work as a whole is somewhat lacking in consistency, both in the theoretical approaches adopted by the various authors and in their choice of subject matter. Overall, however, the approach is clearly culturalist: assertions of identity are assumed to express a feeling of collective belonging to a group whose members share a number of cultural characteristics. In their introduction, the authors acknowledge the complexity of the phenomenon and eschew the concept of identity as something immutable and intangible, preferring to approach it in terms of processes and interactions between groups or individuals. Despite this prefatory caveat, however, some contributors are not wholly immune to the weakness of the culturalist approach, which is that it reifies groups by tracing their development backwards in time as part of a retrospectively teleological interpretation.

This orientation may owe something to the fact that the book is so directly relevant to contemporary politics. In any case, this relevance causes some difficulty to historians of nationalism who often find themselves plunged into the heart of a

debate of which they should be students, not participants. This is all the harder in that the protagonists they are studying can be seen to produce their own 'identities' and, to varying degrees, impose the conditions for the examination to which they are subjected.

This reservation apart, the contributions are extremely rewarding and often original, and the pluri-disciplinary approach is a stimulus to intellectual curiosity. Returning to the perspective I suggested at the beginning of this article, there is no doubt that they encourage debate on the 'national question', since Macedonia is such a notable illustration of the problem in all its various dimensions.

VI

The 'Jura question' is a label for an 'ethno-nationalist' political process which began in Switzerland in 1947. Some Swiss subjects living in the Berne Jura, a French-speaking area which was attached to the German-speaking canton of Berne in 1815, began to demand their independence, a phenomenon which has attracted the attention of numerous scholars. This, like Macedonia, is an exemplary case, involving populations with different languages, religions and histories in a conflict which focuses on the political significance of those differences. Some recent studies[5] have brought out the usefulness of considering the 'Jura question' from a constructivist viewpoint, paying due attention to the way cultural differences are assumed by the protagonists as part of a clash of classifications which is highly relevant to the principles and categories used to subdivide the social world.

Claude Hauser explicitly adopts this approach, and his detailed historical study pays due attention to representations of the 'Jura' as either an 'ethnic' or a 'national' entity, resting on historical or linguistic criteria. In shaping his subject matter he borrows concepts and methods from recent French historiography (represented by the work of Jean-François Sirinelli, Christophe Prochasson and Christophe Charle).[6] Hauser is not interested in the so-called conflict between 'intellectual history', centring on ideas, and the political and social history of intellectuals: throughout the book, he seeks to detect the progressions and networks which developed within the institutions (journals, movements, associations etc.) that fostered cultural awareness.

The structure of the book is chronological. The first part is devoted to the interwar period and brings out the influence of Charles Maurras on the Jurassian intellectuals, who at the time were chiefly anxious to preserve some historical awareness of a *romande* (French-speaking Swiss) identity in the 'Jura, terre romande';

[5] For an overview see Bernard Voutat, 'Objectivation sociale et motivations politiques. La question nationale dans le Jura suisse', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (1996), 30–51.

[6] In particular Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et pétitions au XXième siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990); Christophe Prochasson, 'Histoire intellectuelle/histoire des intellectuels. Le socialisme français au début du XXième siècle', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, Vol. 39 (1992), 423–48; Christophe Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXième siècle. Essai d'histoire comparée* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

subsequently this became a 'Jurassian' identity. The second part deals with the changes brought about by the Second World War, and the divisions which it created among Jurassian intellectuals, some of whom retained their Maurassian conservatism, while others were neutralist and still others supported Gaullist France.

Thus the world war increased the prominence of a type of democratic and socialist intellectual who approached the Jurassian question from a very different angle.

This analysis of the origins of the Jurassian conflict facilitates understanding of the matters handled in the third part, which deals with the way that the demand for independence in 1947 was justified, or combated, by the two organisations that disputed the privilege of 'speaking for the Jura': the Rassemblement Jurassien, which was separatist, and the Union des Patriotes Jurassiens, which was in favour of maintaining the status quo. Both camps undoubtedly fed on the intellectual traditions espoused by various networks that were active in the Jura. The author gives us a very precise account of this intellectualisation of attempts to appropriate cultural products for political purposes. This happily distances him from nationalistic histories which aim only to construct a 'memory' in harmony with present needs, and enables him to understand nationalist constructions via the essential medium of the intellectual.

Hence, even for those who are not primarily interested in the Jura case, Hauser's method, his implementation of it, and the concepts with which he deals make his book of interest both to specialists in intellectual history and those engaged with the difficult problematics of national identity.

VII

At the beginning of this article I emphasised the complexity of the 'national question', students of which are – though they do not always realise it[7] – more or less bound to espouse one or other of two fundamentally different theoretical approaches, the culturalist and the instrumentalist. Without a doubt, the empirical diversity of national conflicts nourishes this complexity and sometimes confuses debate on the subject. Moreover, as shown by the works reviewed here, the 'national question' can be tackled by various disciplines within the social sciences, each with its own viewpoint and its own way of conceiving its subject matter.

However, this diversity, like the variability of the situations examined, should not be allowed to hide what they have in common: the fact that human societies necessarily occupy space and almost always use their territorial location as a foundation for their social identity. But this relationship between space and identity, which is at the heart of the 'national question', varies from group to group and over historical time.

[7] It quite often happens that historians shift from one perspective to another without really realising that they are changing from one concept of the social world to another, thus recapitulating an old debate, among political philosophers interested in the idea of the nation, between the 'German definition', which is clearly culturalist, and the 'French definition', which is basically voluntarist.

These works cast light on some contrasting situations. Sometimes cultural divisions are so intense that they produce a high degree of fragmentation among populations, as in Macedonia and the Swiss Jura; sometimes identity-based demands emerge in a more 'monolithic' context (France, Spain, Italy). However, these studies also show that rather than contrasting a (cultural) 'reality' with a (nationalist) 'representation', it is better to begin with a study of the actual political processes which strive to articulate those two dimensions. As Roger Chartier has observed, relationships to the social world can be articulated in three ways: by developing classifications, by attempting to construct a social identity, and by instituting or objectifying certain 'groups'. This opens two paths to research:

> The first sees the construction of any social identity as resulting from a contest between the representations imposed by those who have the power to classify and label, and the self-definition, whether quiescent or resistant, which every community produces. The second sees social subdivisions as the objective expression of how much credit is given to each group's self-representation, depending on its capacity to compel recognition of its existence by a display of unity.[8]

This provides a good vantage point from which to discern the merits and limitations of these works on the 'national question', for it encourages us to break both with culturalism and with instrumentalism. Because the culturalist approach assumes the presuppositions of the nationalist vision, it is important to point out that demands based on identity, whether ethnic or national, cannot be reduced to their cultural dimensions, but must be seen in the wider context of how power is shared among social groups. The instrumentalist approach, however, may prevent us from paying due attention to the processes of *identification* with territory-based representations of collective identity – processes which cannot simply be equated with the self-interest of those who invoke them.

[8] R. Chartier, 'Le monde comme représentation', *Annales*, Vol. 6 (1989), 1514.