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Nation: The History of a Word

By *Guido Zernatto*

A WORD is like a coin. With a particular coin different men at different times purchase goods of the same or very similar value. With a particular word different men at different times designate the same or a very similar value. Every coin in the course of its history is subjected to different changes in value; for the same coin may suddenly obtain more or less in exchange. Exactly thus does the value of a word change; it can at one time denote more, at another less; a more comprehensive or a more restricted concept. And just as for the coin, there comes also for the word the day on which it is "removed from circulation." As a coin can become valueless, so a word can become senseless, insignificant.

We know that the changes in value of a coin are the consequences of occurrences and changes which take place in the economic life of the people who pay with it. And we know that the introduction of a new standard is the result of very great general revolutions and changes in the life of those who pay with it. The change in value of a word is also an unmistakable sign that in the life and viewpoints of those who use the word, much has changed. If a word becomes fully insignificant, that is the effect of upheavals of exceptional magnitude which have occurred in the life of those in whose conversation it was used. The political small change of the 19th and 20th centuries stands today at the threshold of a general re-evaluation.

At the moment no one knows what the coin *nation* is worth. There are portions of the earth in which one can set up empires with it, and there are countries in which one cannot keep body and soul together with it. Since when have there been nations? What was—what is a nation? It is necessary to cast a glance at the history of the word before the extent of its present sense can be determined. The Latin word *natio* has the same stem as the word *natus*. Both have their origin in the word *nascor*, I am born, whose perfect form is *natus sum*, I have been born. A *natio* was therefore to the Romans something *born*. In Cicero accord-

ingly we find the *natio* also personified as the goddess of birth (*De Natura Deorum*, III, 18, 47).

In ordinary speech a *natio* was understood to be a group of men who belonged together in some way because of similarity of birth. This similarity of condition was seen mostly in the fact that the members of a *natio* were born in the same city or the same tract of land. The size of this group was limited. It was larger than a family (a family was never designated as a *natio*). And it was smaller than a clan (*stirps*) and smaller than a people (*gens*). The Romans never designated themselves as a *natio*. There was a *populus Romanus*; the symbols of the Imperium showed the letters *SPQR*—*senatus populusque Romanus*—but there was never a *natio Romanorum*.

The *natio* was a native community of *foreigners*. Cicero once speaks (*De Or.* 2, 4, 18) of the Jews and the Syrians as *nationes natae servituti*, that is, of people born to servitude. From the previous examples and this last application it may clearly be concluded that the original concept of the word possessed a derogatory connotation. A *natio* was a number of foreign people, who were bound together by similarity of origin; but it was no superior origin. It was people who somehow stood outside, if not indeed below the stratum of Roman society, foreigners.

In the large cities of the Roman empire, in the busy ports, in the colonial settlements, lived such foreigners. They banded together, as is still usual today in the great metropolises of the world, in order to be able to speak their own language, to foster their inherited customs. The people of these quarters were called *nationes*.

The custom of regarding the member of a *natio* as a foreigner, is mirrored very plainly in the derogatory and contemptuous sense the word soon assumed. In all countries—and presumably at all times—the foreigner has not so much an exotic as a comical charm. The foreigner, who does not understand the language or speaks it incorrectly, who is dressed a bit differently than is the custom, who eats and drinks other than domestic products, and who perhaps exhibits a conduct at variance with custom, is *comical*. The representatives of the foreign colonies, not yet acclimated and not yet assimilated, form a standard laughing-stock among the comical figures of all countries. When the

language-murdering foreigner steps on the stage every audience shakes with laughter. The foreigner is a certain laugh-producer.

The member of a *natio* was always a bit comical. In old Rome a group of men which was to be derided was called a *natio*. One spoke of a *candidatorum natio*, of a *natio Epicuræorum*, and Cicero also once called the party of the Optimates a *natio*, whereby he certainly did not wish to honor it.

In the Italian this connotation again arose later; Machiavelli in his *Storia Fiorentina* (Lib. II) speaks at one point of the Ghibelline party as a *nation*: (*perchè era di nazione ghibellina*). In Dante (*Paradiso* XIX, 138) we find the word *nazione* as the designation for men, who originated in the same province or city (Dr. G. A. Scartazzini: *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Milan, 1898).

Besides this chief meaning of the word, there are many others. In different languages the most widely different things have been designated as *nations*. For Edmund Spenser species of animals are a nation. In *The Faerie Queene*, he speaks at one point of a "nation of Birds." Also in the case of whole occupational classes with whom one has a bone to pick, the word *nation* occasionally finds application. Montesquieu calls the monks, for example, a *nation paresseuse*, and Boileau says of the poets: *Connais-tu la nation dévote?* Therein the two Frenchmen are on the same ground as Ben Jonson, who once makes the physicians a nation (*Sejanus*, I, 2) when he says: "You are a subtle nation, you physicians!" Samuel Butler has at the lawyers when he cries out (*Hudibras*, III, 3, 483): "But lawyers are too wise a nation to expose their trade to disputation." Goethe finally transfers the small subsidiary meaning of the word to the female sex: *Wir Mädchen sind doch eine wunderliche Nation*.

From the foreign countries of the Roman world a straight line leads to the universities of the Middle Ages. It is known that in the relatively small towns in which in the early Middle Ages institutions of higher learning were located, students collected from many lands to imbibe the sure nourishment of higher learning. On the strange soil of the university cities the students were just as much foreigners as were once the immigrants into Roman centers of population. They, just like

their ancient predecessors, had a need for union, for expression in their native dialect, the eating of native food and the maintenance of native customs. In order to meet these very understandable needs, they formed their own unions, groups from the same country, and designated them by the same title as was used in ancient times for similar communities. They called them *nationes*.

The *nationes* of students of the middle ages naturally had also the character of permanent representatives of common interests. Whoever was a member of a *natio* could count on it that his experienced colleagues would advise him in vocational questions and he could be sure that the *natio* to which he belonged would defend his interests with respect to the university. In this respect the *nationes* of the universities were also the precursors of our present industrial guilds or trade unions.

Since the twelfth century such student unions (at first in Bologna, later elsewhere) developed a significance which exceeded their original character as unions of students. Within the student unions there were formed, as the result of the customary vigorous disputes, certain common opinions which derived from the commonly accepted views in the common homeland, or from the comparison of these views with the teachings of a beloved or hated professor. The members of a single *natio* supported the opinions of their corps. Thereupon, however, the *natio* had grown beyond the sense of a simple community on the basis of origin. The word now signified more; it designated a community of origin, a union of purpose, and a *community of opinion*. The first external change in value of the coin "nation" was complete.

Falsely then do scholars, desiring to force as long a history as possible on the modern concept of nation, see in these university nations the seed of the modern nationalism of the 19th and 20th centuries. It must be recognized that the university of the middle ages was a church establishment. It was the expression of a spiritual unity on a scale which has never since been experienced by our cultural world; the expression of Roman Catholicism.

Christianity, the *corpus Christianorum*, was not composed of the members of different language communities. It consisted exclusively of *Christians*, that is, of men who as individuals adhered to the same faith

and bore the same responsibility toward the Almighty for their souls. The common language in which this sum of culture was preserved and transmitted, the single language of *all* the cultured, was the Latin tongue. And there was only *one* culture: Christian culture. Even the cultural values of antiquity, e.g. the philosophy of Aristotle and the classical teachings of ancient Rome were (in part before the appearance of St. Thomas Aquinas, afterwards completely) transmitted in an indissoluble unity with *Christian Revelation*. In the sense of the teaching of St. Augustine in *The City of God* the Papacy attempted to live up to this duty through the Roman peace, the *Pax Romana*, the unity and coherence of Christianity. The Christianity of that time therefore *could* not know the concept of nation in the modern sense or even the concept of nationalism.

The four nations of the university of Paris, for example, *l'honorable nation de France*, *la fidèle nation de Picardie*, *la vénérable nation de Normandie* and *la constante nation de Germanie*, as their official titles read, were not at all composed, as their names indicate, of Frenchmen, Picards, Normans, and Germans. The *nation de France* comprised all students who spoke the Romance languages, including Italians and Spaniards. They were an intracatholic *Union Latine*. The Picard nation was set aside for the Dutch, the Norman for people from the North-east, the Germanic for the students from England and Germany. A spiritual unity within these lands, which could have existed beside or outside Christianity, did not exist at that time. There could not be any, because there were no national cultures as such. Questions of ethnic origin or other problems, which could have been related to the phenomenon of modern nationalism, did not exist. The German language community was, for example, divided into Bavarians, Austrians, Saxons, Suabians, etc.

In all this it is important to note that the nations existed only in the *foreigner*. No student would have thought of wanting to play *nation* after his return from the university city. That would have been completely foolish.

The great unity of Roman Catholicism in which a *nationalism* in the modern sense would not be understood, found expression especially in the fact that all differences and causes of strife which arose between

the *nations*, were of a purely religious and scholastic nature; this includes the famous strife at the University of Prague, which led to the departure of the non-Bohemian nations and the foundation of the University of Leipzig (1409). The cause was not, as one would like, for *national* reasons, to visualize it several centuries later, a German-Czech separation, but an intra-ecclesiastical strife. The case of Hus was no Czech-national affair. Just as little was the case of Luther a German-national affair, or the case of Calvin French-national, or the case of Zwingli Swiss-national. There were at that time no Czech-national, German-national or French-national affairs concerning which strife could have arisen; not the language, since the language of culture was Latin, and not an ethnic affair, since the people were Christians and nothing else.

The unitary Christian atmosphere is naturally not free from mighty disturbances. A series of events like the Great Schism, the various reformations and religious wars darkened and narrowed over the centuries the breadth of the universalistic horizon.

* * *

After the death of Gregory XI, who, like three of his predecessors (Clement VI, Innocent VI and Urban V) had reigned at Avignon, the French Cardinals rebelled against the election of an Italian (Urban VI) and elected an antipope, who as Clement VII, took up his residence at Avignon in the following year. From this time the Church had two heads; a false head in the person of the Frenchman at Avignon, and a true leader, who took the honored throne of St. Peter in Rome.

One can hardly measure today the depth of the confusion which was thereby brought about in the souls of the faithful. The spiritual welfare of the individual was the *all* at the time. To see this spiritual welfare threatened was a real and terrible danger. Now the Pope laid upon the antipope and all his followers the ban of excommunication. The antipope on his part excommunicated the Vicar of Christ in Rome and all *his* followers. Thereby *all* the faithful fell under the ban and received the Sacraments from priests who had been excommunicated by one of the two Popes.

How were the simple people to decide which of the two Popes was the true one? Accordingly they feared that they were receiving sinful Sacraments which would condemn them to eternal damnation.

In this time of strife and confusion within the Church, called the Great Schism, there arose naturally besides the chief question, the legality of the Pope, a thousand subsidiary questions, and the most varied spiritual and temporal powers sought to enrich themselves at the expense of the power of the Church. After many other attempts to end the confusion, there was called for the year 1414, at the little town of Constance, a council to which came from all lands of the Christian world, bishops, prelates, and doctors, to decide how the Great Schism could be ended. In point of fact, the Council forced the abdication of both the Pope at Rome and the one at Avignon, and thereby established the unity of the Church. Naturally, however, this method did not solve all the problems which had arisen within the Church. Although the external image of unity had been again restored, the ecclesiastical parties were present. The unity of Christianity had suffered a mighty blow. In 1417 the antipope of Avignon was deposed, but exactly a hundred years later, a German antipope, Martin Luther, nailed his theses to the door of the Domkirche in Wittenberg.

* * *

Even in the earlier councils a tendency had been exhibited among the Princes of the Church to curtail and restrict the supremacy of the Pope. This movement, which in place of the decisions of the Pope, would have a parliament in the form of Councils over which he would merely preside as the representative head, expressed a revolutionary idea; the Church should have a republican form of government. The Vicar of Christ on earth and successor of Peter should no longer be the absolute head of the Church; he should be the "president" of an "ecclesiastical republic." The parties of this "ecclesiastical republic," who were not only the spokesmen of various intraecclesiastical groups of thought, but also representatives of different secular princes and potentates, gathered in groups, which bore the name *nationes*.

The application of the name *nation* to this group is easily understandable. It was indeed the universities which sent the most learned and informed representatives for the clarification of those problems, for whose solution the councils were called. Life in the council cities showed a great similarity to affairs in the university cities of the time. Like the students, the council delegates were *strangers*, in the small towns

usually chosen for council sites. Therefore, there arose during the great ecclesiastical meetings the same need for a union of those who felt themselves bound by a similarity of conversational language, of customs of life, (this movement shows quite clearly that the university nation possesses the right of maternity over the council nations) and of opinion.

The first time we find *nationes* of this kind is at the council of Lyon (1274). At the very significant council of Constance (1414-18), we see them at the zenith of their significance.

It is certain that these council nations had as little to do with our present concept of nation and nationalism as the "university nations." The delegates who belonged to one and the same council nation were everything but "folk-national" or "state-national" in our sense. Many bishops, prelates, and doctors espoused other opinions than their rulers. The "German" nation in Constance comprised not only the German, but also the Hungarian, Polish, Bohemian and the Scandinavian clergy. The Englishmen and Frenchmen were for a long time united during the same council of Constance in a common nation. Only in the year 1417 do we hear of a protest on the part of the English against certain ambitions within the French clergy, who strove to found their own French nation—not a "French-national" nation, in a language sense, but a special group of clergy who hailed from the domain of the King of France.

Still there were no "nations" as people, states, or masses. The council nations were arrangements of the "prenational" time. They did not stand in the light of the dawn of the day of modern nations. They stood only in the rays of the dusk of Roman Catholicism, whose spirit began slowly to overflow out of the Latin language world as out of an overflowing reservoir into the fresh vessel of the new language. Spiritual life within the popular languages did not grow out of the secret depths of nationality. The language cultures are not new creations of the individual peoples. They are nothing else than seedlings of the old tree of the common culture which began to sprout on new soil.

As long as Roman Catholicism was mighty and living, there was only a small or practically insignificant culture within the language

districts of North and East Europe. The creative spirit lived in the Latin language, and, like art, in the Church.

The Church is a teacher. She was, up to that time when spheres of language learned to encompass and maintain spiritual values, the true keeper of the totality of spiritual life. It could not, however, be her duty always to maintain this position as treasurer of all spiritual life. She transferred those goods which did not belong to the true treasury of faith at that moment when a group of men existed which could take them up and develop them further. This included poetry, art, and finally science.

This transfer of spiritual goods by the Church and their adoption by a new secular circle is for both sides a difficult, at times stormy, and often painful process. A true revolution takes place, which is much more comprehensive and extensive than other movements which bear the same name, but which bring about only the substitution of one governmental system by another.

Above all, there arose on both sides a vagueness about the extent of the goods which were to be and which would be transferred by the Church. The new secular cultural stratum was for the most part not properly organized. It degenerated into a struggle of the *nouveau riche* for property and power; simultaneously it overestimated and underestimated property. Secular rulers considered the transfer of the borderline types of spiritual goods, i.e. the emancipation of the now vocal children, as a dissolution process, or as a state of exhaustion of religion itself. They made the attempt to take from the Church much more than what she gave up. They grasped at her original religious sphere of action, and even wanted to usurp the place of the Church.

In such times "reformations" occur. In the secularizations of spiritual possessions secular potentates always see a chance for themselves. They try to bring under their rule the apparently masterless property *and* the Church, apparently exhausted by the act of renunciation. Every secular ruler knows that in religion sleep forces which are indispensable for this goal of possession and expansion of worldly power. Thus history is filled with attempts on the part of the State to overthrow the Church.

With the emancipation from the Church of the secular cultural

estate, there arose a new community; the union of those who adopt an idiomatic culture, nourish it and develop it. To this completely new union the masses, naturally did not belong nor did all the members of a language group. The new apostles of the young language are a small group of missionaries of a new (because born out of religion) quasi-religious spiritual movement. They are, as we have already said, not parts of the still undisclosed popular mass. This popular mass is a dark land of cultural heathens into which the missionaries of secular culture carry their light. The community of these missionaries was and is today still called a nation, a cultural nation. This cultural nation (as the sum of the bearers of culture of a language group) is contrasted with the mass of the people in exactly the same way as the "nation" which developed out of the council parties.

The language districts within which the idiomatic cultures developed never and nowhere had the same boundaries as the states which existed on the same territories. A language culture district was and is ever of different extent from that of the states which exercise their sway over the habitats of the users of a language. Therefore the numbers of the elite on whom devolved the preservation and furtherance of one language culture were subjects of *different* rulers and *different* states. After idiomatic cultures began to exist, there existed also a dualism between culture and state. Hellenic culture was a unit—but the Greeks in all the flower of their culture never laid aside their multiplicity of states. The Latin culture was a unit, and yet at the time of the Roman empire the power of the state never tried to suppress the cultural strivings of the individual language communities which lived within the empire. The culture of the Italian Renaissance bloomed in an unkempt garden whose wildness was overgrown with city-states and dwarf states. The time of German classicism, the time of Weimar, was simultaneously the time of innumerable duodecimo princes, who held court in their little miniature residences.

The process of emancipation of the idiomatic cultural treasures is simultaneously the natal hour of cultural bodies whose development is independent of the development of the states over whose districts they extend. They are, as Heinrich Riehl so nicely says: "The fundament which far outlasts the changeable life of the State."

* * *

Through its application to the council parties the word "nation" suffered an important change of meaning. The council delegates were not only "foreigners" who found themselves thrown together for a time far from the homeland. They had above all a much more important character: they were representatives. The delegates were no longer pilgrims met by chance, following a definite commercial interest, like the members of the old Roman foreign colonies. Nor were they any longer students, following another free decision, that of obtaining higher education, who met for the term of their study in the university city. The delegates were *proxies, deputies, representatives*. They served as proxies for secular princes, they represented universities. Through this character of the members of the council nations, the word *nation* acquired a new expansion of sense. Since the councils, a nation came to mean above all a representative body, whose chief characteristic was that it was assumed that a certain loose bond of territorial origin existed among the individual members of this body. A representative body is however (no matter *how* formed) a *select* group of men, an elite.

Montesquieu, in *Esprit des Lois* (XXVIII. 9) speaks of this kind of elite when he writes the oft-cited and usually misquoted sentence: "*La nation, c'est à dire, les seigneurs et les évêques.*" Read in its context this sentence states: "*Sous les deux premières races on assembla souvent la nation, c'est à dire, les seigneurs et les évêques; il n'était point des communes.*" (Under the first two dynasties [of France] the nation was often assembled, that is the nobility and the bishops. *The common people were not taken into consideration*). This means nothing more than that at the time of Montesquieu the word *nation*, which had passed into the French tongue, was understood in the sense of a representative assembly, a *representation by aristocrats*.

After the beginning of the thirteenth century, the kings of France rather often called the aristocrats of the land to meetings. In the year 1302, when the king was engaged in a dispute with the pope on the question of taxation of the clergy, in the year 1308, when there was a question of disbanding the Knights Templar and of confiscating their domains and treasures, (which happened simultaneously with the spoliation and banishment of the Jews), and also at later times, such gatherings, called meetings of the estates, occurred more and more frequently.

These meetings of the estates had not so much the aim of advising the king as of granting him money. They were tax-levying machines.

Three groups of aristocrats (estates) were called in: the bishops and prelates as leaders of the clergy, the lords as representatives of the nobility, and the third estate, the citizenry, which had to send two delegates from each of the different cities. The kings did not like to oppose the "estates" from the whole kingdom. Therefore they preferred to call together the people of rank separately from the individual domains. The independent princes followed the example of the king, in that they called together the estates of their own provinces. Thus there arose country or provincial estates which were also designated by the term "nation."

The estates of the realm took in France the title *états généraux*; they met for the first time in 1484 to debate the questions proposed by the legal infancy of the king. The *états généraux* debated as divided into *six nations*. Even in the 18th century, in discussing the total population of France, one spoke of a *peuple de nations Françaises*. The word *nation* in the sense of a meeting of the estates or in the sense of the sum of all aristocrats, was usual not only in France. From a distant part of Europe, from Transylvania, history reports an illustrative episode which proves, that there also, many centuries later, the concept of the nation was bound up with the nobility and clerical elite, which was chiefly represented by the clergy.

In the year 1731 there appeared in the Transylvanian Parliament a new delegate of priestly rank. To judge from his youth, one could have taken him for a priest just blossomed forth from the seminary. But he wore the symbols of the episcopacy. When he spoke for the first time, howls of laughter greeted him from every bench. His Latin was atrocious. He mispronounced his words, and his terms of expression seemed to be transliterations of clumsy peasant phrases. The boyish bishop did not let himself be disturbed. He drowned out the laughter of the Transylvanian nobles with the result that the assemblage listened not to his poor Latin, but to the sense of his speech. John Innocent Micu, for that was his name, spoke of the rights and claims of the "Walachian Nation." What he said must have gone against the grain of the gracious, illustrious, serene highnesses. Soon his words again sank

beneath a wild tumult. "There is no Walachian nation" was the cry; "there is only a Walachian *plebs!*"

By this remark no one intended to question the existence of the Walachian (Rumanian) *people*. Questioned only was the existence of a Walachian *upper crust*, an *elite*. Questioned was the ability of the Rumanian-speaking population to be represented. The Rumanians of that time were a poor, inconstant and uneducated people, without their own nobility, and without a broad stratum of spiritual leaders. Bishop Micu was one of the first Rumanians who could appear as a delegate from Transylvania in the circle of the lords. The word "nation" here stands quite clearly for an upper stratum in contrast to the folk, the *plebs*. Only the illustrious counted themselves a part of the nation of that time.

Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) also gave to the question, "What is a nation?" the answer: "It is the sovereign and the aristocracy." And Aulard says in his *Histoire Politique de la Révolution Française* (Paris, 1901, p. 25) "The nation is composed of the lettered and the rich of France."

The concept which arose at the peak of activity of the council nations, that a nation is a community of aristocrats, remained valid for a much longer time than one would like in the "age of nationalism." This is proven, among other things, by an expression of Schopenhauer, who clearly distinguished between a nation as the elite, and the common people as the *plebs*, when he said: "Whoever understands no Latin belongs to the people, even though he be a great virtuoso on the galvanic battery and have elementary fluorine in the crucible." (Schopenhauer, *Werke*, W. W. Ausgabe, Griebach, p. 603.)

* * *

In the 18th century "nation" became a word of fashion. Fashionable words always become—like a much-used coin—very much worn down and flat. They lose their sharpness of impression, that is, they become so equivocal that it is difficult to use them in a serious discussion which depends upon the significance of quite definite concepts.

In our time everything is democratic or totalitarian. In the civil world of the 19th century everything was "progressive." In the 18th century everything was "national." How did it come to be so fashionable?

"It is to be noted that the words nation and state have never been used as much as they are today" wrote d'Argenson in the year 1754; "Under Louis XIV the two words were never spoken, and one did not have so much as an idea of them." That is quite understandable. Under Louis XIV, king and state were one. Whoever meant "state," said "king," and whoever meant "king" said "state." The "nation," the sum total of the elite, played no role. It was not the state. Therefore, under Louis XIV, there was no occasion for frequent use of the words "nation" and "state." When the *Roi du Soleil* died, conditions changed. With him died also his concept of the state: *L'état, c'est moi.* His successor no longer personified the state. He was only the most aristocratic among the aristocrats, "who together composed the state." In the course of time the nation was expanded from below, the privileged group was increased, and a new idea, that of government as a service, gained in significance; therefore in d'Argenson's time there was much talk of nation and state.

Broader sections of the citizenry, who had come into money and esteem, tried to draw a noticeable line of demarcation between themselves and the lower strata. Everything was staked on the finding of means to distinguish oneself as a citizen from the folk, the plebs, the "*peuple.*" The *peuple* was the mass of men who lived by the work of their hands; the sum of all those who were not privileged either politically or in any other way, nor indeed were furnished with any rights whatsoever.

Even in olden times, as shown by Latin terminology the word "*populus*" from which the French word "*Peuple*" arose, was given a derogatory, destructive meaning. *Populatio* means just as much plundering and laying waste as population. *Populator* is the despoiler; *populatus* the spoliation. The verb *populo* and *popular* mean to lay waste, devastate, plunder, destroy, ruin. Thus the Roman idiom evaluated the folk as the masses; a wild animal, which must be ruled precisely because it is a despoiler, a plunderer, and a destroyer. And it was of the utmost importance to the citizenry not to be counted among this plebs, this *peuple*. This desire is well expressed in an anonymous pamphlet dating from the year 1858: "The lawyers have lifted themselves from the class of the people, ennobling themselves without the aid of the sword. The literary class followed the example of Horace in regarding the people

as profane. It would not be proper to call by the name *peuple* those who cultivate the fine arts. Let us also guard against calling business men *peuple*, since one can acquire nobility by commerce. The financiers have flown so high that they find themselves side by side with the peers of the realm. It would be absurd to confuse them with the people.”

How far the passage of time, at the beginning of the French Revolution, had developed a tendency to set up a clear boundary between people and nation, is shown by the deliberations instituted in June, 1789, as to whether the new House of Representatives should be called *assemblée nationale* or *représentants de peuple Français*. Mirabeau recommended the adoption of the latter name, which was more unassuming and more appropriate to the broad masses. But the mind of the convention strove toward higher things—and thereby expressed the true purpose of this revolution. The aim of this incipient movement was not to elevate the “*peuple*” the plebs, from its low station, and to give it equality of political rights. It is not to be thought that the decisive motive of the French Revolution was the will to establish human rights. On the contrary, it is impossible sufficiently to depreciate the influence of human rights on the French Revolution. Human rights were imported from England as a moral paravent behind which the Third Estate shamefacedly tried to complete its separation from the plebs. The goal of the French Revolution was not the raising of the plebs from below to an equality of right. The goal was more moderate; to render more aristocratic a certain upper crust of the plebs. This stratum of the *gens de lois*, of the *gens de lettres* of those *qui cultivent les beaux arts, les négociants, les financiers*, in short, the stratum which was later called the *bourgeoise* wanted to be allowed to feel *liberté* and *égalité* between themselves and the old aristocrats of the nation. The French Revolutionary Parliament called itself *assemblée nationale*, and the citizenry now sat in the seats of the distinguished and of the aristocrats. It played the same role previously taken by *le souverain et l'aristocratie, les seigneurs et les évêques*—certainly it no longer belonged to the people. The citizenry had become a nation. At the moment when the swarm of newly privileged, and newly distinguished *nouveaux riches* could proudly and happily say to themselves: the nation is the distinguished and quasi-distinguished together—the word lost its exclusive significance. In modern cities it is known that “high society” always forsakes its exclusive district when

too many undesirables move into the neighborhood. The "good addresses" which these districts furnish are then suddenly no longer good addresses.

The old concept of the nation as representative of aristocrats was like "good addresses" which the citizens wanted to have in order not to be confused with the "*peuple*." When they all migrated into the nation "quarter," the address lost its old quality. The word nation suffered a significant change of sense. By the term nation there began to be understood all the citizens of a state—even those who were previously plebs—or all those who belonged to a language community—even those who "understood no Latin." With this mass concept begins the new sense of the word nation.

When the new sense (which is unfortunately much more vague than all previous meanings) became common property, is hard to say. "The Thirty Years War" says Georg Schmidt-Rohr (*Die Sprache als Bildnerin der Völker*, Jena, 1932) "knows no nations as groups having their peculiar essence because of an individual political will. It knows only warring princes. The Peace of Westphalia is not concerned with language boundaries as much as with a reorganization of the lands of the princes. . . . Even at the Congress of Vienna only princes sit at the council table—not peoples." Let us add the following: even in 1871, Wilhelm I received the Imperial German crown, not from the hands of the German nation, but from the hands of the German princes. The modern nation arose in the 19th century.*

* This essay is from an almost completed book-manuscript on *The Future of Nations*. Another chapter will appear in a later issue. Translated by Alfonso G. Mistretta.