Interview with Miroslav Hroch

JOEP LEERSSEN

Miroslav Hroch has recently celebrated his 90th birthday. A reason for *SNM* to ask this pioneer and elder statesman in the comparative study of national movements for a brief interview. The questions and answers were exchanged by e-mail in late 2022/early 2023 in a mixture of English and German.

> ***Nationalism nowadays is a very powerful ideology, also in Central Europe. How can historians contribute to our understanding of the present-day situation?***

MH: You will have expected me to raise the issue of terminology at the outset. How are we to understand 'nationalism' in the present-day context? That clarification is the very first thing historians (and social or political scientists) can do to understand the contemporary situation. Alas, they fail to do that. I do concur that in contemporary Europe – including Central Europe – there are increasingly strenuous expressions and lines of reasoning which are labelled 'nationalist'. But we should take into account that this multi-layered, vague term is then used in its narrower, negative sense: roughly, as a mode of self-aggrandizing group egotism invoking one's own nation. That, I feel, does not amount to an ideology. It is an attitude or vision, emotive rather than rational, which can almost parasitically attach itself to any ideology: there are nationalist inflections of liberalism, conservatism, socialism, etcetera. And in each case, it refers to those relationships between the individual citizen and the nation which are judged negatively. We should add to this that the relationship with one's nation must also involve, more or less

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foregroundedly, positive aspects: a sense of responsibility, solidarity, identification. Should historians also address this form of 'nationalism'? Or should we then opt, rather, for the term 'patriotism'? But that term has different connotations in different languages.

Let me give an example. The attitude of the Polish government (and of a sizable portion of the Polish population) vis-à-vis Germany is often qualified, in the European mainstream, as nationalistic (in the negative sense). The same government's negative attitude (along with possibly that of the majority of Poles) vis-à-vis Russia is even more acerbic. Do Western commentators qualify this hostility as 'nationalistic'? Or, to taken another example: Viktor Orbán is on record as wanting to serve, above all, his Hungarian nation. This is condemned as nationalism. But the policies of most leading politicians in Europe during the energy crisis turn out to serve above all the interests of their own nation states – although they may not have been as outspoken on that point as Orbán. They would certainly object to being called 'nationalist', and rightly so: they serve the interests of their people, which is what any government should do. But how should we qualify this if the term 'nationalistic' is so negatively connoted? Again, it strikes me that we lack a positive word for the commitment to one's nation: we cannot use 'nationalism', and 'patriotism' is problematic in some languages.

But to return to the question what historians can do. At the least, they should fulfil their professional duty, and analyse the historical dimension of the contemporary intensification of national identity and of the relationship between individual citizens and their nation. The historical viewpoint allows us to identify certain regularities, connections that tend to repeat themselves. Stated baldly, the most important of these is that the identification with the nation intensifies when social or political crises engender insecurity, conflicts of interests, and upset a value system which previously had been considered unassailable. Of course historians can do little to remedy such crises. Egotistical nationalism,

which is rooted in the exacerbation of objective conflicts of interest, cannot be seen as an aberration or a pathology, to be cured by political manifestos or instruction. However, what may be achieved through a systematic education drive – and perhaps this has been done in some European countries – is the opposite: by campaigning against 'nationalism', feelings of solidarity, of patriotic responsibility towards one's nation, are discountenanced, and there is less and less sense that the nation is an abstract community of cultural values.

If we ask where in this context historians can make themselves useful, then it is here, in the field of the much-maligned historicism. National history has always been an important component of cultural values, on which the identity of the nation as an abstract community has been based. But here, too, we should take into account a certain ambivalence in the maintenance of memory culture, of historical consciousness. Let me give another example from Central Europe. The nationalist reading of the glories of Polish and of Hungarian history is nowadays an important element in that self-aggrandizement of the nation which we can call 'nationalistic'. Such a reading is so manifestly absent among Czechs, especially after 1990, that the idea of the nation as a community of values with which one can identify is becoming increasingly remote. In sum: I think is it wrong and dangerous to reject all invocations of national values and interests or to dismiss them wholesale as being of the 'extreme right'.

> ***You have been fêted by a small 'symposium' in* Nations and Nationalism.**[1] ***Did that collection of responses to your work inspire a wish to respond in turn?***

MH: Those contributions made me very happy, it was a real surprise. In his amicable introduction, John Breuilly speaks of a productive combination of homage and critique. Who would not be pleased by homage? And what he presents as critique is really, for me, a pointer to

questions and problems which my work has left open or unaddressed, and which can inspire future research. It should be remembered that as an individual researcher, with teaching duties at the university but without assistants or sabbaticals, I could only tackle limited topics during the first half of my life, such as the social preconditions of national movements. A book on that topic cannot be expected to deliver a complex analysis of nation-formation processes in Europe. That research I only pushed after 2000, mainly in my *European Nations*.[2]

As to the positive comments: I am very pleased that after more than half a century some of my conclusions and suggestions are seen as an enduring and serious contribution. I especially appreciate the fact that my colleagues concentrate not only on the often-quoted A-B-C periodization, but also mention other results. And I am no less gratified by the recognition of my attempts to study European history as a whole, in spite of the Iron Curtain. And in fact, it is only now (thanks to Xosé-Manoel Núñez) that I realize how such an academically motivated effort could exercise a political influence.

More disappointing I found the lack of attention paid to my later attempts to study the demands of national movements comparatively or the quantitative analysis of their social structure, into which I have invested much time and effort. This may be due to a difference between specialisms and disciplines. If Joep Leerssen, as a cultural historian, says that members of all intellectual professions were involved investigating and raising national culture, then he is right as regards this general formulation covering all countries and periods. However, for social and economic historians, a spatial and quantitative dimension is crucial. For instance: if members of the nobility were involved, then how many of them were there, and where? Was it a mere handful, as in Bohemia, or thousands, as in Poland? Similar questions should be asked for all professions.

The search for the social background of patriots in Phase B was the central point of my research and consequently, it is difficult for me to accept that in all national movements, all intellectual professions were represented. This generalization corresponds neither to the empirical data nor to the basic fact that a national movement is defined through its incomplete social structure (non-dominant ethnic group), i.e. without ruling elites and academics. In addition, to define the social background means also (maybe above all) to study the social origins of national protagonists. In the case of intellectuals, especially, it is important to see what their social background was. Did they grow up within that peer-group, as in the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, or were they from the countryside, as in the Estonian case, or was a third of them born into modest artisan families, as in Bohemia? It is relevant to establish, as I have done, that 5-10 % of Finnish patriots were born in peasant families, but in the Lithuanian case, the percentage is 80 or more. It is an important difference, if the majority of academics has been born in gentry-families (Polish or Magyar case), while this stratum is absent in Slovene, Finnish, Estonian and some other movements. This may be negligible from the point of view of cultural production, but it is relevant if we try to interpret national programmes, national stereotypes, political culture, and also the methods used by protagonists in their patriotic activities.

I have always doubted whether it makes sense to explain such crucial changes in European history as nation formation and the emergence of nation states exclusively through the protagonists´ ideas and their efforts, ignoring the social and economic circumstances and group interests. That appears to me to transplant social changes from reality into a virtual world. Maybe asserting such an old-fashioned position exposes me to the charge of essentialism and groupism.

The Irish case is not typical for European national movements – in that respect John Hutchinson is right. I have always regarded the Irish case as

a very specific one, both concerning its forms, programme, and its social structure. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it is totally unique, since it belongs to the category of national movements and we do find some parallels with national movements on the continent. As in Ireland, we know some European national movements with two 'cultural revivals' (I call it the interrupted Phase A or B): the Slovak Phase B was interrupted by Magyarization after 1870, the Catalan and Basque Phase B by Franco, the Macedonian Phase A by Serbian rule in interwar Yugoslavia. The Ukrainian national movement within the Russian Empire started two 'cultural revivals', both interrupted by tsarist persecution before a Phase B could have started (1840s, 1860s); ultimately, an incipient Phase B in the 1920s was interrupted by Stalinism.

This brings me back to my A-B-C periodization, which John Breuilly thinks can also be useful in an ideal-typical adaptation. Let me say something on this most widely quoted result of my research. How can I explain this general acceptance? I want to point out two paradoxes. One is that, while the periodization refers to real human actions in the service of the formation of their 'nation', most authors are happy to apply it to 'nationalism', i.e. to a psychological attitude. The other is that, while the periodization was based on the distinction of phases of the Czech national movement (I had not admitted this until now), it proved applicable to other movements, not only elsewhere in Europe, but also in South Africa and Taiwan.

This periodization allows a neutral, valueless narrative, workable both in the perspective 'from above' (ruling nation), and 'from below' (national movement). To those who are involved in movements which have not achieved the status of a fully formed nation, it offers a strong hope: 'being in the Phase B, we have a hope to succeed achieving Phase C'. On the other hand, it is (mis)used by radical constructivists as an argument: nations were invented in Phase A and were successfully

established in Phase B by nationalist intellectuals. This is far from my interpretation.

My A-B-C periodization began to live a life of its own in some reflections or reviews occasioned by my book in the 1970s. Even then a colleague opined that it should be expanded by a Phase D – the phase of national statehood. The various phases were given different contents as they were adapted to the various movements that required periodization. One is reminded of Benedict Anderson's ironic resignation, in the afterword to the 2006 edition of his book, concerning the 'second life' of his term 'imagined communities'. It is not for an author to decide how his concepts are later interpreted or developed and so he can dispense with critical comments on that second life. It may be subject to misunderstanding or even a deliberate twisting of words, or else its applicability is widened. The positive thing is, as John Breuilly points out, that the periodization provides a generally used and accepted starting point for further research and reflection.

In the symposium I am (not for the first time) taken to task for neglecting the role of wars. I admit that I hesitated to use them as an explanatory factor in national movements, but I did not deny their role at all. In my opinion, wars were in most European cases above all a consequence of an already existing strong nationalism; and there is no doubt that they strengthened the already existing aggressive nationalism. Only in some cases (e.g. the Macedonian) we could say that national identity was decisively formed by a war or by its results. But we should distinguish (and many authors fail to do this) between the 'imperialist' wars between established state-nations and the wars waged by small nations either in the struggle for national liberation or for solving mutual problems (as it was the case in Balkans). In one specific stage in the process of nation formation did war play a decisive role: it was when nation-states were established. I know of only one nation state, which achieved national statehood exclusively by decision of its own members

through a referendum, without great-power intervention – Norway. All other nation-states in Europe were established by a decision or with the approval of the Great Powers in a war-crisis situation or at the end of a war – be it World War I or II. In most cases, national movements achieved their political independence already under the conditions of a strong mass movement – Phase C. Since my research was focussing on Phase B, the narrative on politics during the Phase C and the role of wars remained outside my scope.

It seems to me that some colleagues know my *Social Preconditions* book,[3] but did not pick up on my later publications in article or book form. For this reason, I cannot accept their criticism at least in two cases – that I neglect regions and regionalism (as Eric Storm asserts), or that I have ignored the question 'what constitute a language'.

As to the language, its nineteenth-century codification was not important to my research in the 1960s. Nevertheless, I was aware of the important social impact of language and linguistic codification. Later on, in the 1990s, I published my research results on the role of language in national movements and later included this topic in my book *In the National Interest* on national demands, where language played an important role.[4] Some sociolinguists, like Joshua Fishman, found my contribution interesting enough to invite me to participate in their projects. It may be that my results were different from what Tomasz Kamusella published almost 20 years later. A part of this research focused on the role of the search for a unified written ('printed', in Anderson's terms) language.

Concerning regions, in the 1960s, when the core of my book was written, the relationship between nation and region was not an object of historical discourse. But even at that time, the term 'regionalism' was used in comments about 'separatist' political activities like the Scottish or Catalan ones. These activities represented, in my terms, national movements at the level of a still not very successful Phase B. I engaged

with the difference and interference between region and nation much later and published some observations on that topic in the first decade of the present century. There is no doubt about the increasing importance of regionalism during the last two, three decades. My comments on this phenomenon were, however, influenced by a suspicion that many projects on 'regionalism' collected data and prepared arguments servicing the political goals of the EU. Supporting 'regionalism' could be used in the service of the EU's agenda against negatively defined nationalism. Recent research on phenomena called regions or regionalism is more sophisticated and more relevant than at the time when I studied Phase B of national movements.

With great satisfaction, I noticed that not only John Breuilly and Miloš Řezník, but also other participants in the Symposium read and reflected on my conceptions very carefully, also as an inspiration for further research. Elisabeth Bakke pays attention to the change in one of my explanatory instruments, 'nationally relevant conflict of (material) interests', which I expanded and modified in the 1990s to include also non-material interests (struggle for power, regional conflicts, prestige). Also in other aspects, the criticism of my omissions or inconsistencies is well-founded. Concluding his remarks, John Hutchinson states that I have explored small nations more as a social structure than as a cultural construct. He is right and I presented this weak point of my research in my last reflection about this topic which was published in *Nations and Nationalism* in 2020.[5] I regret that I studied the nation above all as 'social group' (or 'structure'), underestimating the nation as an abstract community of cultural values. It seems to me that John Hutchinson shares my sense that combining the 'sociological' und 'cultural constructivist' approach opens new perspectives in future research. A similarly 'holist' perspective inspires Karel Šíma´s suggestion that to analyse festivities means both to study their ideas, their forms of communication, and their social composition.

Finally, I have to comment on a further paradox in the 'second life' of my concepts (not only the A-B-C model). Their successful 'global' application stands in contrast with my repeatedly published opinion that the nation is by its origin and cultural tradition a specifically European phenomenon. In Marianne Kriel's view, I am too careful to accept the applicability of my model of national movements outside Europe. Be that as it may, the Dutch-Afrikaner movement is not a very persuasive case in point, since that ethnic community has European roots both in religion, and in cultural tradition. There may be, in some aspects, a parallel with Quebec.

Similarly, the other non-European case mentioned by Jitka Malečková, the case of the Turkish national movement, concerns a movement that was inspired by the European concept of the nation as an instrument of modernizing opposition against the supranational concept of the Ottoman Empire. A European concept of nationhood was imported and adapted in order to secularize and modernize Ottoman society and to transform it into a Turkish one. The turn from a premodern imperial (Ottoman) identity to a national one is not unique. It also happened in the process of Danification, when the originally transnational allegiance to a Danish Empire was transformed, during the nineteenth century, into a national one. By the way, Danes do not belong to the category of 'small nations', as Sinisa Malešević suggests. But even if I query the non-European character of the Turkish and Afrikaner movements, I do not deny the existence of some, possibly many adoptions of the 'Hroch' model in 'nationalist' political movements around the world. Sometimes it was a deliberate import, as in Sun Yat-sen's China; sometimes it was a spontaneous imitation. It could be very useful to undertake a comparative research project about the acceptance of a European model of nation and 'nationalism' in other continents. It would correspond to the fashionable 'globalization' of history.

Your comparative work on national movements concentrates on the provincial peripheries of Europe's great monarchies. How do you see the relationship between this analytical frame and the global/postcolonial perspective which has recently come to the fore?

MH: We can pick up here where my answer to the previous question left off. It can be generally observed that all emancipatory movements went against the existing political order – i.e., the multi-ethnic realms, or great monarchies. Centre-periphery tensions can be registered even in the early modern period, both in Western and Eastern Europe. The political aspects of those tension in some cases prefigured later national movements – or rather: the later national movements harked back, with more or less deliberateness, to these provincial oppositions. Cases in point would be the Hungarian Estates in the Habsburg Monarchy, Irish and Scots in Great Britain, Catalans in Spain, the Finnish nobility in Sweden. But in the final analysis these were political struggles for power and also, sometimes for traditional privileges.

The nineteenth-century situation was more differentiated. Some movements aimed primarily at a cultural emancipation, which could serve as the basis for a new entity, the nation. Provided this cultural emancipation appeared non-threatening to the dominant political elites of the multi-ethnic realms, it was tolerated: in the Habsburg Monarchy, partly also in the Ottoman Empire. Russia extended toleration only to non-Orthodox ethnic groups. And wherever national movements made political demands, they were met with repression. Repression was mitigated once a constitutional regime could take hold. Of course I am simplifying the complexities, but the point is that this involves crucial differences between European and extra-European, postcolonial emancipation. The various elements related here as factors of national (and proto-national) movements, were absent from the emancipation process in the colonies. No protonational run-up such as a demand for

estates or political participation; or a premodern literature in the national language. Also, the word 'nation' was understood differently; in most cases it was from the outset linked to statehood, as in the English usage, while, conversely, the nation as a community of cultural values was under-emphasized. There are a few exceptions: The Tamil, possibly the Canadian First Nations. Should your question suggest the possibility of a comparative framework, I would be sceptical. You can compare post-colonial political developments with nation-formation in Europe, for ultimately everything can be compared, but the differences are so great that only marginal conclusions can be drawn from such a comparison. The only thing that both processes have in common is the terminology of 'nationalism' as used in English, a word that can be linked to totally different phenomena and situations.

How do you see your intellectual position vis-à-vis Benedict Anderson?

MH: As always, there is a mix of agreement and criticism. Anderson advanced very important insights and analyses which have deservedly been widely quoted, such as the premiss of 'imagination' as a condition for the acceptance of a national identity. But unlike postmodernists I see that concept, not as an 'invention', but as the individual's capacity to bring the existence of other members of the nation to mind. That is very important indeed, but it has been pointed out before. The American historian Gale Stokes published two articles, one of them in the 1970s, which highlight the role of the imagination and connect it with the capacity for abstract thought as gained through school education.[6] What was also important was his reference to the importance of printing, of the Reformation and especially of capitalist modernization. I agree, but I am also pained that Anderson neglects to refer to K.W. Deutsch, who is absent even from the bibliography. Where I differ from Anderson is in his global notion of the nation, as if the nation takes shape analogously everywhere. This also means that I have reservations about his

argument by exemplification, which documents, or rather illustrates, his models with facts both from Europe and from Indonesia.

> ***In the study of national movements and national thought, researchers from Central Europe are strikingly strongly represented: besides you and your own circle, we can think of Isaiah Berlin, Hans Kohn, Ernest Gellner, Eugen Lemberg and Karl Deutsch. Is this merely an infrastructural condition or can one identity a Central-European 'school' with its own perspectives and methods?***

MH: Yes, I have been asked this question before, and to the names I can add that of the well-known Austro-marxist Otto Bauer, from Northern Bohemia, or the less well-known Prague sociologist Heinz Otto Ziegler, who published an excellent study on *Die moderne Nation* in 1931.[7] But among all these researchers, I am the only one who spent his entire life in Prague. Kohn, a Zionist, emigrated to Palestine and from there moved to the US; Deutsch, Gellner and Ziegler, after having studied in Prague, fled the country as Jews; Lemberg had to leave the country in 1945. As far as I know they were never in touch with each other. So we cannot speak of a school, but on the other hand, is this mere coincidence? We can only speculate. It would be so simple to speak of a *genius loci*, or a certain something that is part of the Central-European experience. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that national conflicts (German-Czech, German-Polish) were so long-lasting and notorious that they codified activist arguments and methods. All of us grew up in a social and political atmosphere where every occurrence was linked to a national narrative. In addition, the Jews as 'third parties' were particularly aware of this atmosphere, and among the names mentioned only Lemberg and I were non-Jewish. Antisemitism on both sides of the national opposition may have played an important role. But all of that is a hypothesis at best; but one could test it by a dissertation comparing our

various lives and writings. Only – which student in 'the west' would nowadays command all the languages involved?

In any case we cannot speak of a Central-European School with its own methods and perspectives. Not then and, alas, not now. Among my students, Miloš Řezník is the only one who works on nationality issues, but his institutional framework is a German one. Students in Prague in the 1990s became averse to anything to do with 'nationalism', and such interest as there was, was pursued in the framework of Czech history. How things are these days, I do not know.

Endnotes

[1] J. Breuilly et al., 'Symposium for Miroslav Hroch', in: *Nations and Nationalism* 28/3 (2022), 737-759; online at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/nana.12851. Names and positions mentioned in MH's response to this question refer to contributors in the 'Symposium'.

[2] M. Hroch, *European Nations: Explaining their Formation* (trl. Karolina Graham; London, 2015). More on Hroch's development as a scholar and researcher can be found in his *Intellectual Autobiography*, (Antwerp, 2018), online at https://nise.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Hroch.pdf.

[3] *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, 1985).

[4] *In the National Interest: Demands and Goals of European National Movements of the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective* (Prague, 2000); *The Social Interpretations of Linguistic Demands in European National Movements* (Florence, 1994).

[5] 'The Nation as the Cradle of Nationalism and Patriotism', in: *Nations and Nationalism* 26/1 (2020), 5-21.

[6] G. Stokes, 'Cognition and the Function of Nationalism', in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4/4 (1974), 525-542; 'Cognitive Style and Nationalism', in: *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 9 (1982), 1-14.

[7] H. Ziegler, *Die moderne Nation* (Tübingen, 1931).