GIBRALTAR AND THE RELATIVITY OF MODERN NATIONS

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The debates on the nature of nations have been one of the fundamental drivers of events in modernity. In other historical moments, the legitimacy of rulers was based on the will of God, economic and military power, or belonging to a caste or family. In some places, this remains the case. However, the spread of modern liberal regimes across Europe and the world since the 18th century changed this paradigm in most countries: today, it is the nation, "We, the people," that sustains and legitimizes the actions of the government.

But what is a nation? Do nations exist inherently, with defined and eternal characteristics, or are they imaginations, ideas, political projects dependent on context? In the academic world, two fundamental positions are recognized in this debate (Smith, 2013): a constructivist one, rooted in French and Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment thought, and an essentialist one, more developed in German idealism. While Jean-Jacques Rousseau or John Stuart Mill emphasize the will of people to unite and form nations, Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte propose the essential characteristics, the "special law" or unique "spirit" that guides each people.

The answers to these questions are not insignificant, as they influence, if not guide, political actions. If nations possess a spirit, a language, and a land essentially their own, they will always have reasons to claim what they consider theirs: the land of Palestine will always belong to the Jewish nation, even if thousands of years have passed; the people of the former Russian Empire and later Soviet Union must always be loyal to Moscow; Austrians and some Swiss will always be Germans, whether they like it or not. Yet history shows us evidence to the contrary, as it is clear that nations can grow or shrink. What remains today of the former Königsberg in Kaliningrad? What became of the Greeks of Ionia and Smyrna? Is Brazil still Portuguese? Is Belgian Wallonia an irredentist part of France? Should Istria return to Italy? Are all Arab countries the same nation?

The essentialist view of nations has been, although only to a certain extent, delegitimized by the numerous conflicts it led to in the past and still causes in the present. With all due respect to Marxist interpretations, the first and second world wars cannot be simply explained by the will of the European bourgeoisie to crush workers' movements and socialist revolutions. The entire expansionist project of the National Socialist and Fascist regimes possesses a marked nationalist odor (Griffin, 2018): whether it is the vocation to unite all peoples who speak the same

language under the flag of one country or to grant the nation a greater territory on which to develop.

Nationalism has understood these errors and has adopted forms more compatible with liberal and democratic standards. The nation is currently seen by intellectuals and much of liberal politics as an "imagined community" (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992; Núñez-Seixas, 2018; Cagiao y Conde, 2022) that, even if it often possesses cultural characteristics and a reference territory, depends primarily on the will of the individuals who compose it to exist. However, traces of essentialist nationalism still persist today, sustaining past conflicts or promising to trigger others in the future. If we focus on the irredentist component, we can observe the Russian-Ukrainian war—at least concerning Crimea—the conflict between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China—which some simply refer to as Taiwan—the long-standing dispute of Israel in Palestine, the tensions in the Near East between Azeris and Armenians and between Turks and Kurds, or the ever-volatile situation between Pakistan and India.

A less well-known conflict that demonstrates how these issues persist even in old Europe is the one between Spain and the United Kingdom, ongoing for 300 years, which periodically resurfaces to occupy some headlines in the press of the continent and the Isles. This can serve as a good illustration of the topic.

Gibraltar is a small stretch of land of less than 7 km^2 located at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula. Ŷabal Tāriq—as the Rock was called by the Arabs—was conquered from the Emirate of Granada in the 15th century by the Castilians and remained an interesting point for the refuge of the Crown's ships, control of navigation in the strait separating the continent from the Maghreb, and a military fortification in wars with the so-called Muslim "barbarian kingdoms." According to the chronicler Ignacio López de Ayala (2007 [1782]), by the late 17th century, the city was home to around 6,500 people, had an interesting economy based on wine and fish, which it exported to some domestic and foreign markets, and depended heavily on the nearby area in the Bay of Algeciras.

In 1704, during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714), a contingent of British, Dutch, and Catalan forces under the orders of Prince George of Hesse-Darmstadt conquered the stronghold in the name of the pretender to the Spanish throne, Archduke Charles of Habsburg. Subsequently, in 1713, with the victory of the side of Philip of Anjou—who would be known as Philip V of Spain—a series of treaties were signed in the Dutch city of Utrecht to end the war. Among them, the peace treaty between the Spanish and British crowns established the cession in perpetuity of Gibraltar and the island of Menorca to the British in exchange for a series of conditions: not to allow the establishment of Muslims or Jews, not to harbor warships from Muslim nations, not to alienate these properties without first giving Spain the opportunity to reclaim them, and to allow the free exercise of the Catholic religion.

The cession of Gibraltar was the most controversial due to the ambiguity of the text's wording (Del Valle Gálvez, 2013; Verdú Baeza, 2015). The formula used did not clearly specify what exactly was being ceded nor how, and it rather seemed that the only thing the Spaniards were handing over to the English was what lay within the castle walls. However, the British took control of the entire Rock and governed it. Most of the original inhabitants were expelled after the conquest, and it became a military stronghold, a resting point for ships, and an entrepôt for trade for much of the 18th century.

Almost all the conditions of the Treaty of Utrecht were violated in one way or another, and eventually the new owners of the Rock even expanded their dominions further. Although the Spanish crown attempted to recover Gibraltar by force on several occasions (during the Anglo-Spanish War of 1726-1729 and during the Spanish involvement in the American War of Independence, between 1779 and 1783), it had to repeatedly accept the maintenance of the cession and the validity of the agreement in new treaties signed.

The Rock flourished under the political and economic changes of the following centuries. The Industrial Revolution and the increase in naval traffic through the strait made it an important commercial post. It developed its own bourgeoisie, which gradually learned to defend its interests and gained some autonomy. By 1801, local newspapers such as the *Gibraltar Chronicle* were already being published, and in 1830, it transitioned from being merely a military outpost to a “crown colony.” Its progress led to the establishment of various institutions, such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Sanitary Commission, the Exchange Committee, and the Gibraltar Employers' Federation, which demonstrated the vibrancy of civil society that was already thriving in the place by the end of the 20th century.

Bonds with Spanish territory did not vanish. It is estimated that by the end of this century, around 10,000 or 12,000 Spaniards crossed the border daily to work in the city's businesses. Such was the dependency of the Bay on Gibraltar that, when dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera sought to restrict trade and crack down on smuggling more rigorously, the population of the Spanish town of La Línea de la Concepción dropped from 63,000 to 35,000 (see Grocott & Stockey, 2012). We know that marriages between both sides of the border were not uncommon, that there were certain festivities, such as the Royal Calpe Hunt, enjoyed by both Spaniards and Gibraltarians, and that more than once even local authorities exchanged congratulations and showed courtesy. Over time, a hybrid local dialect of English and Spanish called *Llanito* even developed.

This good coexistence and symbiosis at the local level had no parallel in the state sphere. The Spanish governments and much of the Spanish nationalist intelligentsia saw it as a national humiliation, a sign of the country's historical weakness that needed to be corrected as soon as possible (Sepúlveda Muñoz, 1996). This sentiment gained greater prominence with the arrival of Francisco

Franco Bahamonde's dictatorship, which ruled Spain following a coup d'état and a civil war from 1936 to 1975. During those forty years, his regime repeatedly attempted to annex Gibraltar to Spain.

However, this was not possible. In 1967, as part of the decolonization process mandated by the United Nations, the Gibraltarians voted on whether they wanted to remain in association with the United Kingdom, obtaining their own constitution and a status of broad self-government, or integrate with Spain. In a referendum, the choice to remain under British sovereignty won with more than 99% of the votes. The reaction from the Spanish side was swift: the closure of the border, the *verjazo* of 1969, which lasted until 1982, seven years after the dictator's death. The only result was increased misery, the division of families, and the rupture of many of the connections that had united Gibraltar with Spain.

The agreements between democratic Spain and the British government led to a new referendum, this time on shared sovereignty, in 2002, where the “no” vote once again won by an overwhelming majority. This does not prevent the fact that today the majority of Spanish nationalist-oriented political parties continue to demand a new agreement for Gibraltar, and the conflict frequently reappears in the news. From a Spanish politician swimming across the strait and unfurling a Spanish flag on the Rock (GBC News, 2016) to the winners of the European football championship shouting “Gibraltar is Spanish” in front of an euphoric crowd (Greenall, 2024). The communication problems continue to create issues, including the lack of commitment to combating smuggling (Agencia Tributaria, 2023) and the conflict over the territorial waters of the Rock (Pérez Sierra, 2022).

The history of this long conflict shows us the complexity of these phenomena, and how territories that once belonged to a nation can cease to do so. How nationalism, something not necessarily negative and an essential part of our political systems and identity, can be instrumentalized to override the will of other peoples based on essentialist and non-pragmatic arguments. Gibraltar was part of Spain centuries ago, but when the population is no longer the same and has explicitly expressed its will not to be part of the country, treaties signed in the 18th century lose their argumentative sense.

Here, we can find some of the most common mistakes in managing international and identity conflicts: lack of concern for the population, absence of pragmatism, lack of dialogue and cooperation from both sides, and interruptions in relations and communications. Social movements and governments driven by the feelings of outrage from a segment of nationalism lead to the maintenance of international conflicts that are not beneficial for any of the parties involved. A paradox that history has not left behind and that continues to influence some of the most important conflicts of our time.

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