

2007

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Moltchanova, Anna. "Nationhood and Political Culture." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 38, no.2 (2007): 255-273. Accessed via Faculty Work. Philosophy. *Carleton Digital Commons*. https://digitalcommons.carleton.edu/phil_faculty/3

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Nationhood and Political Culture

Anna Moltchanova

Substate nationalism has noticeably affected the political and territorial stability of many countries, both democratic and democratizing, especially in the past fifteen years. The actors in conflicts of self-determination employ “nationhood” to identify themselves. Yet the fact that they claim national identity does not necessarily place them in the class of nations, nor does it immediately entitle them to self-determination. Judging the legitimacy of granting a particular group the right to self-determination requires determining first whether it in principle qualifies to advance the claim. A clarification of how nationhood relates to self-determination and a commonly accepted definition of nationhood could introduce much-needed conceptual clarity to the assessment of substate groups’ entitlements and to the definition of the subjects of the right to self-determination.

Presently, the very notion of “nation” is ambiguous. The word has several meanings, including “people,” “national minority,” “the population of a state,” “ethnic group,” and “title nation” or “majority.” The UN Charter declares the right of all peoples to self-determination, but “people” is not clearly defined and does not in principle exclude substate national groups from the entitlement. In current international practice and law, the terms “nation” and “state” are often used interchangeably. One document designed to protect national minorities, the European Framework Convention, for example, recognizes states as the undersigning parties and emphasizes its signatories’ respect for those states’ territorial integrity and *national* sovereignty.¹ Thus, the convention seems to introduce confusion between nationhood and statehood. International law overall does not define the status or the powers that non-state groups that claim to be nations in multinational states should have in relation to other groups, their citizens, and their own national minorities. The meaning of “national,” especially in light of terms like “national sovereignty,” needs to be clarified.

My concern in this article is to offer a pragmatic definition of nationhood that can serve as an appropriate conceptual background for determining the status and norms for relations of national groups in multinational states. I do not defend any set of normative principles designed to regulate relations of self-determination among national groups. Rather, I first introduce two criteria that any definition of “nation” has to satisfy to be better at conceptualizing nationhood than the status quo, and I explain how rival conceptions of nationhood fail to satisfy the criteria. Then I put forward my definition of a nation—a collective agent characterized by a political culture of self-determination with which its members self-identify.

1. The Two Criteria

If a definition of nationhood is to be productive, it needs to reasonably take into consideration that group agents make claims concerning their status and mobilize from an actively maintained “internal” perspective, regardless of whether the identity they construct is perceived as politically valid or factually adequate historically by outside observers.² A definition of a nation needs to be attuned to groups’ constitution as they presently relate to one another. The two criteria below, both of which an adequate definition ought to satisfy, reflect this goal.

We cannot properly decide whether the differential treatment of national groups is justified on the basis of a definition that presupposes differential treatment. For example, defining nationhood as having a necessary connection to statehood—what I call the “nation-state approach”—prejudges the outcome of the discussion in favor of the very difference between state-endowed and non-state national groups that is being questioned. Given that it is impossible for each national group to have its own state, when such a definition is used to formulate international legal principles and the domestic policies of multinational states, it disadvantages groups without state institutions that reside within the territory of a multinational state and cannot be the basis for addressing their claims, as the claims challenge this contingent distribution of political power associated with statehood. *Criterion 1* (hereinafter referred to as “C1”) grows out of the necessity for a definition of “nation” not to be normative:

C1: A definition should not determine the normative content of the principles designed to regulate relations among national groups with respect to their self-determination claims or any other entitlements. Thus, group rights or entitlements should not be part of the definition.

Nationhood is a complex phenomenon that includes aspects of personal and group identity, history, culture, and political preferences. All of these features are shared by several kinds of groups, not only by national groups. We need to be able to tell what distinguishes ethnic or administrative units from national groups, what the similarity is between multi- and mono-ethnic national groups, and what differentiates groups with very similar “national” cultures that form different national communities. We also need to be able to tell if a national identity in question truly characterizes a group—that is, if it is supported by those deemed to be members of the group. Thus, we need to be able to discern when group identity changes or does not correspond to its official expression. *Criterion 2* (C2) grows out of these needs and requires the construction of a notion of nationhood that registers the complexity of the phenomenon relative to the context of its use:

C2: A definition should be pragmatic: it should provide sufficient guidance in determining whether a set of individuals qualifies as a nation for

the purpose of the regulation of relations among the subjects of multinational states and be able to account for changing group identities.

I share Rogers Brubaker's caution concerning the scope and the aims of the idea of a nation. He claims that "nationalism can and should be understood without invoking 'nations' as substantial entities; 'nation' is a category of practice, not (in the first instance) a category of analysis."³ Like Brubaker, I appreciate the dynamic aspect of nationhood. National allegiances are contingent; identity categories, however, especially translated in the form of group members' beliefs and intentions, do structure the world through collective action. Brubaker states that "nationness is an event that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops."⁴ Yet something constitutes this nationness, for how else can we declare that the crystallization has occurred? Identifying the required features is the task of a definition of nationhood. We want to know how to regulate the collective actions of groups, even if their identity is changeable. Thus, considering a nation as a special type of collective agent allows us to introduce a category of analysis of practice that accounts for changes while helping to qualify the various claims of minority national groups and to establish some principled basis for the regulation of relations among all national groups.

2. Some Definitions

In this section, I will consider current leading types of definitions and explain why they do not satisfy either C1 or C2. The failure to satisfy C1 or C2 makes a definition incapable of providing a foundation for any framework of legal regulations that will be better than the status quo.

The nation-state approach is formulated in different ways based on how the relation between nationhood and statehood is interpreted. States can be simply defined as nations. Anthony Giddens argues that a nation exists only when "a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed."⁵ Units that do not have corresponding states are referred to as nations only mistakenly. To discuss their political situation, Giddens argues, some other category of description should be used.

When states are not defined as nations, the correspondence between the two is presented as either an inevitable or a desirable outcome of political development. A functionalist account suggests that the successful function of a state leads to the formation of national identity within the borders of the state. Margaret Canovan argues that most democracies are nation-states of one nation. For a state to function properly, she explains, there has to be a sufficient sense of solidarity among its citizens, and nationhood is the best candidate for creating and maintaining such solidarity; in fact, it *is* this solidarity.⁶ A nationalist account claims that nations ought to have states of their own.⁷ According to Ernest Gellner, a state is necessary to maintain a culture of a homogenized, impersonal, industrialized

society with a high level of division of labor. Thus, a successful nation-building process results in the formation of a nation that corresponds to a state. In Gellner's view, the problems of unstable multinational states are resolved either by changing state boundaries or by assimilating some national groups.

The nation-state approach highlights three important features of nationhood: its organization around the ideal of the coincidence of political and national units, its historical contingency, and its relational nature. The latter feature is introduced by Giddens, who points out that national identity and its corresponding institutions cannot take shape and exist except in the process of a group's functioning as a collective agent in relation to other similar agents. The nation-state approach, nevertheless, violates C1 because it explicitly acknowledges certain groups' entitlements by associating statehood with both nationhood and self-determination. Moreover, when the nation-state account merely predicts (or expresses the desirability of) a multinational state's eventual falling apart or transformation into a one-nation state, the approach makes itself irrelevant to the relations of national groups in multinational states *before* these changes take place, violating the pragmatic requirement of C2.

David Miller's definition does not introduce normative ranking and hence satisfies C1. He describes a nation as "a group of people who recognize one another as belonging to the same community, who acknowledge special obligations to one another, and who aspire to political autonomy—this by virtue of characteristics that they believe they share, typically a common history, attachment to a geographical place, and a public culture that differentiates them from their neighbors."⁸ In order for the definition to satisfy C2, what is meant by "public culture" needs qualification. Federal units of the United States possess a degree of political autonomy; while their citizens perceive them as political communities with their own governing bodies, most of them think of their states not as nations but as parts of a bigger nation. Members of an ethnic minority share a public culture, and often they have a degree of autonomy in the formulation and administration of political measures designed to safeguard their culture and language. However, the public culture of an ethnic group is very different from that of a national group with respect to its demands on political actors. What is more, there are different nations with similar public cultures: Romania and Moldova share many essential elements of culture, but they certainly have two different public cultures—not as ethnically different groups but as different nations. "Public culture" and "political autonomy" hence can be used as elements in defining not only national but also other kinds of groups. When Miller wants to distinguish between national and ethnic groups, he points out that national groups make a claim to self-determination and create the appropriate organizations and institutions to fulfill the claim.⁹ In the next section, I provide a definition of nationhood that follows Miller's in important ways but focuses it by spelling out how nations as collective agents are constituted: how the public culture of national groups and their actual or desired political autonomy relate to self-determination.

Subjective definitions of “nation,” like that of Margaret Moore, stress that there are good reasons to understand “nation” as subjectively defined.¹⁰ She says that “the term ‘nation’ refers to a group of people who identify themselves as belonging to a particular national group, who are usually enclosed on a particular historical territory, and who have a sense of affinity to people sharing that identity.”¹¹ If it is pointed out that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation or behave as if they formed one, then this begs the question, for one has to define what a nation is in order to describe their concept of a nation.¹² One can try to avoid circularity by avoiding using “nation” in the description of a group’s self-identification. Alfred Cobban, for example, considers that “any territorial community, the members of which are conscious of themselves as members of a community, and wish to maintain the identity of their community, is a nation.”¹³ In this case, the definition is not helpful in avoiding the problem of the distinction between nations and populations of cities or ethnic or national minorities, and hence it fails to meet C2. The content of self-identification has to be specified, and I will show that the required elements are constitutive of a political culture of self-determination.

3. A New Definition

Nations are groups whose members share and identify with a particular kind of political culture, or a set of beliefs and attitudes concerning politics.¹⁴ Basic to this political culture is the belief that membership in the group defines the bounds within which political authority can originate meaningfully for those it governs. That is, political power exercised over the group is authoritative only if it derives from the group as a whole. In addition, the members of the group share the corresponding collective end of establishing or maintaining effective agency. Thus, members perceive their national group as a *primary* political community: there is no larger or smaller political community to which they relate that can represent their agency. Members of a religious community, for example, normally consider the larger society to be their primary political community, while citizens of a multinational state consider their national units to be their primary political communities.

The political culture of nationhood defines for co-nationals one of the conditions under which a political authority is capable of governing them legitimately. The reasons by which the members of the group are governed cannot apply to them only from the perspective of the state power, regardless of the group’s position on the issue of membership in the state. National identity underscores that political power ought to originate in the agency on whose behalf the authority operates. One may object that according to this definition, a federation does not count as a nation, while its constituent “nations” do, but the primary political group for the members of federations, like the UK or Switzerland, is the whole of the federal state. This concern can be easily resolved based on my definition. If members of a *de facto* federal unit consider the federal state as their primary

political community, they constitute not a national unit but an administrative-territorial unit. (If the members of all federal units do so, the federal state and the national group coincide.) My definition avoids rigidly ascribing status to groups based on present geographical divisions and thus satisfies C1.

Members of a national group not only ought to share the beliefs of a national political culture but also ought to be willing to approve them as describing what they truly self-identify with. In an oppressive society, people may act in accordance with an official set of beliefs that describes the terms of membership in a national group without acknowledging these official beliefs and the corresponding political culture as truly representing their identity. Such a “vacuous” political culture cannot define a nation. Or the leadership of a cultural group can strategically promote claims to nationhood, but if the population to which these claims refer does not endorse them as authentic expressions of its identity, these claims about where the meaningful limits of political authority ought to lie similarly fail to define the national group. A definition that ignores self-identification with the political culture of nationhood by those whom this culture identifies as members fails to satisfy C2.

An individual’s belief of national belonging is accompanied by a second-order belief that his or her belief in membership is shared by other co-nationals. This second-order belief in part motivates individuals both to hold the belief of membership and to act upon it. Members give meaning to their idea of nationhood through the notion of the ideal correspondence between the identified domain of members and the political power of a primary political community. If, as is presently the case, there is more than one political community in existence in the world, the members also have a notion of other groups that, like them, share an identity that describes a primary political community, as well as a notion of all such groups’ ideal mutual standing and their corresponding powers and entitlements. Thus, another type of second-order belief involves those outside of the perceived national group. Individual actions performed in light of beliefs about nationhood are interdependent with respect both to co-nationals and to individuals outside of the group, because beliefs about others’ beliefs serve as reasons for acting. The actions of co-nationals based on a shared end are not merely interdependent but also cooperative.¹⁵ Therefore, co-nationals constitute a collective agent.

The relation between Quebec and the rest of Canada may help illustrate the meaning of interdependent and cooperative actions in the creation of national agency. The consistent refusal by the rest of Canada to acknowledge Quebec as a distinct society heightens the salience of the boundary between Quebec and the rest of the country. Quebecers share what they perceive as a national identity. Non-Quebecers know that Quebec will not accept the rejection of its belief about the nature and bounds of its membership and that Quebecers know that they know that. Thus, the Canadian non-recognition of Quebec is a repeated interdependent—but not cooperative—action in relation to Quebec. Likewise, Quebec’s attempts to use language laws protecting the prominence of the French language in the public sphere as a means to maintain its identity have been seen

as polarizing by non-Quebecers. Quebecers knew that the rest of Canada would perceive the laws as violating the rights of non-Francophones and that the rest of Canada knew that Quebec knew its actions would be met with this predictable reaction. Quebec thus also pursued interdependent but not cooperative action with respect to the rest of Canada, contributing to a stricter demarcation of political space in Canada rather than its increased sharing. Quebecers' efforts to maintain their language, however, are cooperative among the members of Quebec society.

To be what James Nickel calls an "effective agent," a group ideally has to possess the capacity to formulate its goals, to recognize and follow norms, and to act and evaluate outcomes.¹⁶ Depending on the group's real situation, its shared end can be either to establish or to maintain effective agency. It needs to be emphasized that the exercise of effective agency is not required for being a national group. The presence of a political culture endorsed by the members with the shared end of becoming an effective agent is sufficient to identify a group as a nation. In short, then, *nationhood can be defined as a political culture based upon the shared end of acquiring or maintaining effective agency having to do with self-determination with which those identified as members self-identify. Nations are the corresponding collective agents.*

If a group agent perceives self-determination as the good it wants to pursue, it aims to be entirely determined by the conditions of its internal life. This pursuit is relational in a world with more than one community, because each group agent can safeguard its autonomous existence only in relation to others. Presently, a group agent cannot be entirely determined by the conditions of its internal life in non-political terms, because if the agent does not conceive its self-determination as political, it will be included in the political society of another group and thus determined by external conditions. Political organization of a type that places a group agent in control of both its membership and the rules of its organization is normally tied to territory. In this world, groups with a non-political (and thus by extension non-territorial) idea of self-determination belong to a category other than that of "nations." Thus, presently nationhood is a territorial notion.

For example, the Roma claim to be a non-territorial national group. The terms of interaction of the members of the Roma residing within territories under the administrative control of other political communities that the members envision as ideal determine what type of group they aspire to be. To determine whether the Roma are a nation or an ethnic group, we need to consider the group's intentions. If the Roma conceive of their nationhood in terms of political self-determination and thus need territory for their political pursuits, we should consider how to provide them with territory. If the Roma do not conceive of their nationhood as requiring anything beyond certain self-governing powers within the political and economic structures of their host states, on the other hand, they function as an ethnic group.

The reality of international relations also implies that self-determination is not presently conceived as the capacity of one worldwide political community to be shaped by the conditions of its internal life (and thus be self-determining, or in

control of its political future, in a non-relational sense). Still, such a community could be considered a nation, although it would not be able to exercise self-determination as freedom in respect to other similar communities. Thus, my definition in principle could apply to a world without divisions among political communities.

It may be objected that sometimes groups may politically organize around linguistic or cultural demands but not self-determination because they are too small or scattered to make a claim for the latter, whereas they can pursue the former. In this case, the political calculation of whether to pursue self-determination seems to influence the philosophical issue of the category the group belongs to. However, only claims for linguistic rights *constitutive* of corresponding group agents are important in the context of defining the nature of groups. If a group claiming only rights to language or culture continues to define itself through its goal, albeit frustrated, of acquiring effective agency organized around self-determination, it is constituted as a nation (for how else would we know that its claim to language rights is not its members' highest aspiration, but a compromise?). If there is no indication that the group is constituted around a political culture having to do with the self-determination of a collective agent, on the other hand, the group is not a nation. This rules out those groups that share many characteristics with national groups but do not define themselves through this kind of political culture. Linguistic, religious, cultural, or ethnic minorities seek accommodation within existing primary political communities. My notion of nationhood as a particular type of political culture also excludes political cultures associated with the middle level of democracy, such as that of a self-governing municipality, from defining nationhood. The powers of a city government are normally defined not in relation to other similar agents but by the sharing of competences with the larger political community (usually a state), its primary locus of legislative and executive power.

Another clarification concerning the meaning of "self-determination" is that even in its current relational meaning, it does not in principle have to be closely associated with the acquisition of a state of one's own. Sharing a state with others does not necessarily preclude a group from being self-determining as long as it has a say about the terms of inclusion and a chance freely to agree to belong by, for example, choosing not to exercise the right of exit established in its country's constitution.¹⁷ Many argue that, politically, states create nations and not the other way around. However, a large number of states in the world have failed to accomplish this task. My approach clarifies when a statewide nation-building strategy is successful: the outcome of such a strategy creates one political culture of self-determination within the state, with which all citizens self-identify. If there is more than one such political culture within a state or if citizens do not self-identify with what is presented as the national political culture, a single corresponding nation has not been created.

Political elements of nationhood (such as claims to political autonomy or self-determination) are recognized by many authors, but their notions of nation-

hood also include other elements that go beyond political culture.¹⁸ Thus, it could be objected that although it may be necessary to establish the presence of a political culture of self-determination in order to be able to distinguish between national and ethnic groups, my definition is too narrow in its focus on political culture alone. Below, I consider why the presence of such a culture, together with self-identification, is sufficient to define nationhood.

3.1 Why Political Culture and Not Culture?

There are two interconnected characteristics of culture that are commonly identified as relevant to its being used in concepts of nationhood. The first is that culture is shared by the members of a nation.¹⁹ The second is that members of nations recognize one another through their common culture.²⁰ Culture also allows others—non-members—to recognize members of a nation. By considering a process of naturalization, I will establish that it is sufficient for individuals to recognize one another as belonging to the same or different political cultures associated with self-determination in order to determine their corresponding joint or separate national membership. Since not all national groups are willing to accept immigrants as citizens, I will use this example to highlight what kind of culture is important for characterizing “open” nations and will then explain why the same culture suffices to deal with “closed” ones as well.

Foreigners living either abroad or within the territory of a nation cannot claim membership in the nation merely by virtue of their desire to belong, even if they share many traits of what is referred to as “national character.” For a national of Z to become a member of X, Xians have to recognize the Zian as a co-national. A private recognition and acceptance of the Zian by each Xian is not enough, even if the Zian is a very famous person who everyone wants to become their co-national. Xians realize that their approval has to be publicly communicated. There is also an understanding among co-nationals that they have the power to accept a foreigner because, as a national group, they are in charge of regulating their membership. The recognition of a foreigner as a new member is achieved in big, impersonal communities through the mediation of the institutions that symbolize the power of the people of X.

The transition from outsider to member does not signify that the culture of the Zian has changed, although some naturalized citizens are willing to undergo and are successful at achieving difficult cultural assimilation. Compare a visitor who shows many traits of the “national character,” such as language, pronunciation, culture (as both a set of habits and common cultural images), knowledge of literature, and so on, with an immigrant citizen who has not yet culturally assimilated. What kind of culture will allow co-nationals to recognize the latter but not the former as one of them? It is the status as a member in relation to the national political culture, a set of shared beliefs about the limits and membership of the political community, that makes the latter into a co-national.

Whether shared beliefs constitute part of a national group's political culture depends on the context of their use. The belief that French should be the language of Quebec, when expressed by a member of the Francophone community who is concerned with the survival of this community's culture, is a cultural belief. This same belief is a part of Quebec's political culture, however, if it addresses the corresponding right Quebec citizens claim to have: a right to choose, as a self-determining community, which direction Quebec's culture is going to take and which aspects of its government are to be promoted.

Not all beliefs from political culture need to be agreed upon or shared by all members of a political community. Co-nationals may disagree about many issues, such as which party should be in power, or about moral values, and they may also belong to very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They agree, however, that they belong to the same collective agent and that they ideally ought to share a political community. However, there is a limit to the kinds of arguments, controversies, and disputes that can coexist within the same political culture. A disagreement about the status of a secessionist group in a state whose remainder thinks that the group should remain within its borders transcends the limits of one political culture and presents a conflict of self-determination between two different political cultures, because the secessionist group does not want to belong to the state. I do not deny the importance of the language or customary beliefs and material traits of a national group beyond the political realm, but I argue that concentrating on political culture is sufficient for determining what a nation is for the purposes of regulating relations among national groups, because it is sufficient to constitute effective group agency.

It is fair to define through political culture not only open but also ethnically, culturally, or otherwise exclusive nations. An exclusive cultural nation, Y, may identify a set of features necessary for membership and consider those who do not possess them to be nonmembers. Y's relation to a particular kind of political culture is sufficient to identify it as a nation: it uses special characteristics to identify and control the set of members of its political community, because it possesses or aspires to possess the capacity to determine the limits of meaningful political authority. If eventually Y relaxes or changes its exclusive criteria of membership, it will still remain a nation: it is not the particular criteria but what it wants and can do with them that defines what kind of group it is. If Y seeks protections and exemptions within a broader political culture, it is not a nation but an exclusive ethnic or cultural group.

The issue of defining nationhood may appear more difficult when we consider complex—what David Miller calls “nested”—national identities.²¹ A “nested” nation is a group with a “split-level” or double identity and a double allegiance to its (usually federal) state and its national group proper, such as the Scots in Britain or the Catalans in Spain. Since Miller emphasizes that national groups normally aim at political autonomy as an independent unit,²² a precondition for a group's successful existence as a nested nationality is that the recognition of its aspiration to self-determination within the larger state is acceptable to its members. Other-

wise, nested national identities may very easily become what Miller defines as rival national identities that belong to secessionist groups. The concept of nationhood as political culture shaping the constitution of effective group agency indicates the continuous existence of a nation even if its ethnic and cultural makeup changes and registers the change of group identity from non-national to national. Concentrating on the aspects of a group's political culture to determine whether any transition in national allegiance has taken place and whether it is over is especially important for transitional societies. Thus, my definition satisfies C2.

Definitions that use culture instead of political culture in the notion of a nation pass C1 but fail C2, because the idea of culture, when not qualified as political, is too inclusive to distinguish between national and ethnic groups and too exclusive to unequivocally recognize multicultural nations. Moreover, culturally based definitions are not helpful in transitional societies whose political identities are in flux.

3.2 The Expression of Potential Political Cultures

I have already explained how the requirement that a political culture characterizing a nation be endorsed by co-nationals excludes official cultures in an oppressive society from characterizing nationhood. But what exactly constitutes national political cultures in the partial or complete absence of the corresponding public spheres, and how can we detect their existence? What I call a "potential political culture" is to a great extent imagined by co-nationals, since it does not have a systematic expression. For its members, however, it still represents a shared set of beliefs about the meaningful limits of political authority and the corresponding membership.

Different ways to express these beliefs exist. For national groups with institutions of self-government, the limits of membership defined in the vacuous and potential political cultures largely coincide, but co-nationals do not self-identify with the official expression of their group identity. For example, most citizens of the former USSR who might have carried a slogan reading "Long Live the Soviet Socialist Federal Republic of Russia" would have done so in order to conform to the expectations of the party and of Soviet officials that they behave in accordance with the official complex of beliefs. Their action would not have been directly motivated by their approval of the idea that "Russia is a nation," even if they would have independently endorsed it. Moreover, the content of the belief "Russia is a nation" is not the same as the content of the belief "Russia is a socialist nation." Although co-nationals cannot be sure about the beliefs others hold due to the lack of communication in the public sphere, their sense of national belonging and their conviction that this belief is shared by others can nevertheless be verified in a variety of contexts, such as the church, some nongovernmental organizations, and political parties, if they are permitted. The whole of the national political culture exists as a set of incomplete and overlapping spheres of expression maintained by the pockets of horizontal ties among citizens that can be different in different areas populated by the national group.

When a national group, usually a minority, is severely discriminated against and lacks the means of expressing its political culture, its identity is inadvertently confirmed and publicly expressed in a negative form by the hostile attitudes of the political culture of the oppressing nation. An exclusionary treatment by the authorities aimed at the suppression of the minority identity, such as an explicit prohibition of any political institutions for the group or a targeted violation of its members' human rights, can indicate the group's existence. A potential political culture of the minority nation is provided with an "exoskeleton" of the set of beliefs of the vacuous political culture as its public expression.

Since membership in a potential political culture is sometimes not entirely defined even for its members, their beliefs may change when their culture acquires full expression and their collective agency has a chance to actualize. One of the potential political cultures of Moldova, the former Soviet republic formed on the territory annexed by the USSR in 1940, was organized around the idea of reunification with Romania. This political culture heavily influenced the initial national mobilization after the fall of the USSR but was defeated by the rival conception of an independent Moldovan nation. Thus, it would have been a mistake to consider Moldovans a part of the Romanian nation based on the potential political culture that favored Romania. But a judgment about their desire to be an independent nation would have been both wrong and premature if it had been made during the Soviet era: it was simply not clear what Moldovans' national identity would be until they had a chance to express their effective agency properly. The uncertainty of potential political cultures calls for a cautious approach to claims to nationhood in oppressive or transitional societies. The presence of a vacuous culture tells us that we should pay attention to changing or not clearly expressed national identities and suspend our judgment concerning the national composition of the society in question. This does not mean, however, that we should not define in advance the terms of interaction among any national groups that might emerge within the territory of a transitional multinational state. Doing so can facilitate peaceful political changes during the transition to democracy.

My definition of nationhood identifies potential candidates for nationhood in oppressive societies, which is the best that can be done when political expression is controlled. The effort of the international community to improve oppressive states' human rights records increases the chances that we can learn about their national makeup with more precision. If basic human rights are not respected, it is often hard even to identify a group as a collective agent because of the difficulty that the group's members face in expressing their beliefs or maintaining everyday group functions. Respect for basic human rights and freedoms is a fundamental condition for the exercise of collective agency. Only after the group members can function in a minimally normal political and social context can we identify the constitution of the group with sufficient certainty and employ the idea of nationhood.

3.3 *Benedict Anderson's Definition*

My definition identifies nationhood with a certain type of shared political culture and may appear very similar to Benedict Anderson's. He defines a nation as an imagined political community: its members will never know all of their fellow nationals in person, but they imagine their communion as a fraternity with finite and elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. This community is imagined as sovereign because the freedom of nations is understood through the notion of state sovereignty.²³ I agree with Anderson that national communities are imagined; some ways of imagining group membership, however, do not constitute a national community or, if exclusively associated with nationhood, leave certain communities that are nations out of consideration. I deal with these two problematic modes of imagining communities in turn to demonstrate the differences between my and Anderson's approaches to defining nationhood.

First, the two definitions are different in focus. Anderson's definition of a nation specifies the general propositional content of beliefs that define a national community. My definition considers not only the content of beliefs about national belonging but also what propositional attitudes individuals identified as members hold toward this identification. Institutions organized according to certain elites' image of a nation may have an administrative reach over a territory they define as the nation's territory, but we cannot tell if that territory truly contains a nation unless we can determine that its population, "imagined" by the elites as fellow nationals, identifies with the beliefs of national belonging. This happens when individuals approve of these beliefs' content and sincerely act in accordance with the beliefs. If the individuals act, instead, in order to comply with certain rules with which they disagree but which they are powerless to change, they are not in fact members of a nation. A nation can be politically engineered, but we cannot determine that a state-backed national mobilization has succeeded without verifying the attitudes toward the leading definition of membership in the corresponding nation of those who are included within the reach of institutions organized based on this definition.

Anderson writes that the Creoles who participated in Latin American independence movements redefined non-Spaniards (former slaves and aboriginals) as citizens of their respective nations.²⁴ Anderson acknowledges, nevertheless, that the independence movements in question were "thin" social movements because they did not include slaves or natives. For example, while San Martín called Peruvian natives "citizens of Peru," to determine whether the Peruvian nation in his time truly extended to the natives we would need to first determine whether they identified with his definition and thus "imagined" the same nation as San Martín did. Anderson, therefore, provides a description of what the sets of beliefs that characterize nationhood are, but to identify a set of beliefs as corresponding to a particular nation, we also need to explain how those considered to be national members within the set of beliefs feel about that identification. My definition does

this by hinging on self-identification with a political culture of self-determination, and thus it satisfies C2.

Anderson's historical account of the creation of nations suggests that sovereign statehood is part of each nation's imagination. However, this account excludes communities that conceive of their self-determination in substatist and interstatist terms,²⁵ and it gives national groups in just and stable multinational states only a tentative status. Statehood is a widespread historical aspiration of groups defining themselves as nations, but state sovereignty provides only one way for a national group to maintain and exercise its freedom. If the nation-state is considered to be a paradigm that characterizes the relationship between nations and states, it presents as universal categories that take their meaning from a specific historical context. Thus, if interpreted with the focus on historically typical terms, Anderson's definition violates C1. My definition does not associate nationhood with statehood. Finally, the conjunctive requirement of Anderson's definition that a nation be limited and sovereign is captured by my idea of self-determination alone.

3.4 Why Self-Identification Is Not Enough for Defining a Nation

The discussion of the previous two sections points to the importance, in defining national groups, of individual identification with a set of beliefs about national belonging. Can a set of individuals in a given territory be defined as a nation on the basis of their members' self-identification alone? For example, can the Northern League, an Italian political party, announce that its members feel themselves to be part of a bounded political community and thus that they are their own nation? To assess such a claim, we need to consider two questions. First, we need to determine whether there are individuals who are not members of the league but whom the members of the league claim as fellow nationals and whether these non-member individuals identify with the league's idea of national membership. Second, we need to consider what other political cultures of self-determination exist within the territory the league claims as its national territory. I will demonstrate below that answering the two questions uncovers "objective" features of political culture.

To self-identify with beliefs of national belonging, an individual has to approve of these beliefs and behave directly on the basis of them. This requires the individual to engage in interdependent cooperative actions with others who hold similar beliefs. Thus, the individual has to believe that others share her belief of national belonging and that she can gain the knowledge about the beliefs of others through a public framework that expresses and reaffirms second-order beliefs of belonging, including the notion of shared group ends. From a historical perspective, this system of beliefs needs to be passed along to future generations. If the Northern League were to claim nationhood for both members and non-members and the non-members were to identify with this claim, this would imply that they had learned about the national identity beliefs

of others and know whom they can engage to perform interdependent actions that endorse these beliefs. Thus, a structure of political culture that is not exclusively subjective would be revealed.

Can we decide what political cultures of self-determination are present in an area by considering only individual national identities? We cannot decide on the national makeup of an area simply by tallying up what the majority of individuals in the area think “subjectively.” A minority in the area may develop a national identity different from that of the majority. Its identity can be overridden by the summation of majority preferences, because majority rule is not capable of recognizing permanent minorities. But even registering *all* of the subjective individual preferences within an area does not allow us to decide on its national makeup. Using census data regarding individual identification to determine what national identities are present in a given territory does not allow us to distinguish between ethnic and national minorities. For example, each member of the minority may identify as a member of a particular nation, but the group as a whole may not aspire to self-determination, as would be the case if the group members thought of another state beyond the given territory as expressing their national identity and perceived themselves to be only an ethnic minority within the territory in question. Thus, unless some collective forms of identification are also considered, using a summation of individual preferences to determine what nations are present in a territory threatens to violate C2. We need to consider the “objective” mode by which national political cultures function through the corresponding interactions of group members, and thus consider national groups as collective agents.²⁶

Now we can evaluate the national identity claims of the members of a political party—a set of individuals scattered around the area in question, such as the Northern League. If the group is non-territorial and does not aspire to be territorial, it is not a nation, as I discussed in the case of the Roma. If the group has the collective goal of maintaining or acquiring effective agency to control its political future, and if it is capable of doing this without including non-members (that is, if it can be viable should it be given a territory that accommodates its members as a territorially concentrated group), its claims are reflective of nationhood. If the political party goes beyond its membership in identifying its fellow nationals, we need to consider how these non-party member individuals relate to the political culture of nationhood expressed by the political party. If those identified as members mobilize accordingly, the group deserves to be considered national. But we cannot decide whether the preferences of the members of a political party reflects the existence of a nation only based on the summation of individual identities without verifying whether a corresponding national group agent is present.

Summing up, a nation is a collective agent characterized by a political culture which is organized around the idea of self-determination and with which members of the nation identify. This definition satisfies the two criteria. It does not settle the question of entitlement of national groups in advance, and therefore it satisfies C1. The definition satisfies C2 because it provides distinctions among various groups

based on their self-definition as collective agents, requires the verification of claims to nationhood through the self-identification of those deemed members, and accounts for dynamic changes in national identities.

4. Some Practical Implications of My Definition and Objections

It can be objected that nationhood is an amorphous concept that makes it unclear who holds the right to self-determination. My concept of nationhood is clear enough to specify the potential holders of this right, and it does this better than the existing international system. The present legal right to self-determination belongs to occupied or colonized national groups,²⁷ but this definition of its subjects is unhelpful in a multinational setting. In an occupied territory with several national groups, does each of them deserve the right to self-determination (and in the present system, a state of its own), or do they have to exercise the right jointly and hence, in the present system where statehood and self-determination go together, share a state? We still need to define those groups that qualify to enjoy the right—even a very exclusive right—to self-determination. But it is much easier to do this with a comprehensive and pragmatic conception of nationhood at our disposal.

Since secession is not only destabilizing but also in most cases impracticable, accommodating the self-determination claims of national groups in relation to one another within their host state is a priority. The recognition of their basic entitlements as constituting a particular kind of actor allows national groups to share a state on the right grounds—from their and others' perspective. All groups identified as national meet at least one necessary condition for being the same type of subject at the federal level. They qualify, *prima facie*, to equal status in relation to one another in their ability to control their political futures. It should be mentioned, however, that qualifying as a national group is not sufficient to receive equal entitlement to those of other similar groups: if a group does not satisfy the definition, it is in principle not capable of entitlement; if the group satisfies the definition, it may be disqualified on other counts.

National units within a federation often contain national minorities. Should the participation in the federation of these “minorities within minorities” be mediated by their current host national units, or should they be considered immediate federal subjects? In principle, minority national groups have to be able to relate to the federation directly, and, ideally, hold membership in the state at the federal level of authority equal to that of other national group agents. In mixed federations, an administrative unit, such as a province, and a national unit are different types of federal subjects. An administrative unit cannot be a member of the federation at the same level as a national group, because territorial-administrative units normally perceive their powers (even if they have regional parliaments) to have been delegated by the respective national units into which these powers are ultimately vested. According to my definition, territorial units

without separate national identities are parts of the same national group, even if the group is very big.

It may be objected that examining the political culture of a community to determine whether this community is a nation provides a reason for the group to mobilize along certain lines in the hope that, in the end, it will gain a right to self-determination. A wave of ensuing sovereignty claims from national minorities can destabilize the states they belong to, creating a tendency toward seemingly endless division. This is not a real threat for two reasons. First, my definition guards against strategic mobilization: a group elite mobilizing solely to make a sovereignty claim cannot qualify its group for nationhood. Second, national mobilization is only a problem if statehood and nationhood are tied in such a way that nationhood implies statehood as a granted privilege. Nothing in my definition requires or implies that self-determination be associated with statehood. As a matter of fact, my goal is to define nationhood so as to *not* link it to statehood. If anything, the definition—being a description of a universal feature of national groups, presently in relation to other such groups—sets the ground for looking at the self-determination of every group as limited by the exercise of self-determination by other groups, and it therefore provides for restrictions on the right. I agree with Chaim Gans that a right to self-determination is not a right to a state or to a complete sovereignty over a territory.²⁸

The objection described above seems to imply that defining national communities in terms of political cultures related to the meaningful limits of political authority will instigate or speed up a change from non-national to national communities. A national community can emerge from a non-national community, but it is hard to find a case in which it has happened for no reason. Failing to acknowledge non-state groups with particular claims pertaining to national communities as such will, if anything, mobilize national groups on more dangerous terms than those that could be otherwise defined and regulated. The objection may assume that non-state groups are already national communities that are not mobilized. In this case, providing a clear definition of “nation” cannot make the situation worse. Whether such mobilization is undesirable depends on the norms guiding a nation’s relations with others, but it is not the definition that determines the outcome. The lack of a definition, moreover, significantly diminishes the chance of such norms being formulated.

My definition stays clear of the questionable normative link between nationhood and statehood and enables us to differentiate national from other groups with some similar characteristics, such as ethnic or cultural minorities. The idea of nationhood proposed in this article provides an appropriate starting point for the discussion of rights claims advanced by national groups and their mutual standing within multinational states.

I would like to thank the referees and editors of The Journal of Social Philosophy for their extensive comments.

Notes

- ¹ Council of Europe, European Treaties, ETS No. 157 (Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Strasbourg, 1.II.1995).
- ² We need to pay attention to what Carol C. Gould calls “social ontology of groups.” A group exists only in and through individuals related to each other in the group and ceases to exist when relations no longer hold. See Carol C. Gould, “Group Rights and Social Ontology,” in *Groups and Group Rights*, ed. Christine Sistare, Larry May, and Leslie Francis (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 43–57; at 44–45.
- ³ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ⁵ Anthony Giddens, “The Nation-State and Violence,” *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 119.
- ⁶ Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1996), 69.
- ⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 1.
- ⁸ David Miller, “Secession and the Principle of Nationality,” in *Rethinking Nationalism*, ed. Jocelyne Couture, Kai Nielsen, and Michel Seymour (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1996), 261–82, esp. 266.
- ⁹ David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 113.
- ¹⁰ Margaret Moore, “On National Self-Determination,” *Political Studies* 45, no. 5 (1997): 900–13; at 905.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 905.
- ¹² Lea Brilmayer provides a similar criticism of the subjective approach in “Secession and Self-Determination: A Territorial Interpretation,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 16, no. 177 (1991): 177–202; at 177.
- ¹³ Alfred Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination* (New York: Crowell, 1970), 65.
- ¹⁴ Archie Brown identifies that part of culture bears relevance to politics as political culture but excludes laws, formal institutions, and behavior patterns from the scope of culture. A. Brown, “Conclusions,” in *Political Culture and Communist Studies*, ed. A. Brown (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), 155. Stephen White includes behavior in a definition of political culture (*ibid.*, 6). I exclude both political institutions and an unqualified idea of behavior from the notion of political culture.
- ¹⁵ An interesting account of collective agency can be found in P. Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Christopher McMahon defines a collective agent as a group of cooperatively disposed people that has made the choice of a cooperative scheme or of a procedure for selecting schemes. *Collective Rationality and Collective Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40.
- ¹⁶ James W. Nickel, “Group Identity and Group Rights,” in *Ethnicity and Group Rights*, NOMOS XXXIX, ed. W. Kymlicka and I. Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 235–56.
- ¹⁷ It is enough for my project to assume the truth of a point widely accepted in the scholarship on nationhood, namely that it is not necessary that statehood and nationhood be firmly associated. For example, see Miller, “Secession and the Principle of Nationality,” 261–82; A. Buchanan, “Recognition Legitimacy and the State System,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Winter 1999): 46–78.
- ¹⁸ David Miller and Margaret Moore emphasize the importance of political self-consciousness for nations as opposed to ethnic groups. See Miller, *On Nationality*, 113; M. Moore, *The Ethics of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.
- ¹⁹ Thomas W. Pogge, for example, defines a nation as “a potentially self-sustaining community of people bound together by a shared history and culture.” (Thomas W. Pogge, “The Bounds of Nationalism,” in *Rethinking Nationalism*, ed. Jocelyne Couture, Kai Nielsen, and Michel Seymour [Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 1996], 463).

²⁰ Miller, "Secession and the Principle of Nationality," 266.

²¹ David Miller, "Nationality in Divided Societies," in *Citizenship and National Identity*, ed. Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 125–41.

²² *Ibid.*, 127.

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵ See Chaim Gans, *The Limits of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁶ For a discussion of ontological status of groups, see Gould, "Group Rights and Social Ontology."

²⁷ For the arguments supporting this interpretation, see A. Cassese, *Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and H. Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination: The Accommodation of Conflicting Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

²⁸ Gans, *The Limits of Nationalism*, 119.