

OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

Nation and Sovereignty: A Response to Boyarin

Partha Chatterjee 

Columbia University, New York, USA
Email: pc281@columbia.edu

In his provocative article “The New Jewish Question,” Daniel Boyarin has offered a view of the Jewish nation as a collective identity that is not only diasporic but also “counter-sovereign.” I found his reappraisal of the history of Zionism very informative. Unfortunately, I do not have the competence to engage with it. But I do have a few things to say about his more general claim regarding the possibility of nationalism being dissociated from sovereignty.

Boyarin uses Eric Hobsbawm’s argument that the meanings of “nation” that prevailed in Europe in earlier centuries were very different from its modern meaning to claim that one might reinvent those earlier meanings today and imagine the nation as a collective identity that has nothing to do with state sovereignty.¹ I am afraid Boyarin’s bold and entirely well-intentioned move ignores the crucial question of how, in the absence of some imagined community such as the nation, the identity of millions of people who are citizens of a territorially defined sovereign state can be culturally negotiated and emotionally felt. Or is he suggesting that states may continue to claim sovereign jurisdiction over its citizens, including the powers of taxation, surveillance, imprisonment, and mobilization for emergencies such as disasters, epidemics, and wars, without invoking the moral obligations of national belonging? Or is he actually gesturing toward the as yet utterly unrealistic possibility of a world without sovereign states?

The People-Nation and the Nation-State

Let me begin with Boyarin’s discussion of my distinction between the spiritual and material domains of nationalism. By plotting a necessarily unilinear transition from the phase of construction of a culturally defined national community to a sovereign nation-state, I think he is overlooking several other possibilities.

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 15–16.

In my earlier works, one of which Boyarin cites, I was concerned to trace the genealogy of the Indian nation-state in the century-old history of social and cultural reform in different regions and communities of India in the areas of language, religion, caste, family, and everyday life.² These reform efforts were carried out by a new educated middle class that used the technology of print to create institutions such as newspapers, publishing houses, literary societies, civic associations, religious orders, schools, and places of public entertainment that managed to stay outside the reach of the colonial state. This was the autonomous “spiritual” domain of national culture over which the nationalist elite claimed “sovereignty” even as the material world of economy and government was ruled by their colonial masters. The claim of “sovereignty” here, seen from the vantage point of the postcolonial present, was of course an aspiration, indicating the desire of the elite to one day replace the colonial state with its own sovereign nation-state. But this particular genealogy traced in my early work tells only part of the story of nations, states, and peoples.

I find it useful to think of the “spiritual” or cultural construction of a collective sense of nationhood as the building of a people-nation. It claims that a people, culturally bound by the common ties of language, ethnicity, or religion forged and affirmed through the technology of print (and later of the radio, cinema, television, and electronic media) is identical to an imagined community called the nation. But, as Ben Anderson so spectacularly demonstrated in his analysis of the historical experience of nationalism in Europe and the Americas, this people-nation then took a further step.³ A crucial aspect of the democratic revolutions in Europe in the nineteenth century was the aspiration of each people-nation to become a nation-state. This was the historical force that ultimately dismantled the European empires and gave rise, by the early twentieth century, to the more or less universal demand for the right of nations to self-determination. In other words, the people-nation sought to become a nation-state. A double identity had to be established: people = nation, followed by nation = state.

But that is not how the actual history of nations has unfolded. The transition has been frequently quite messy, ambiguous, and unpredictable. I was first made aware of the complex relationship between the people-nation and the nation-state when reading Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on what he called the “passive revolution” in various European countries.⁴ In Italy, for instance, the Risorgimento produced the nation-state well before anything like a people-nation had been constructed: Italian intellectuals were still busy embellishing a Renaissance high culture that had long gone sterile and had no vital links with the mass of the people. In Germany, on the other hand, the Lutheran Reformation laid the foundation for a thriving popular culture in the German language on which intellectuals grafted the lessons of the

² Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, “Notebook 4, Section 3,” in *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph Buttigieg, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), esp. p. 142.

Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In other words, the people-nation was firmly in place in Germany before its political unification into a nation-state. Gramsci also makes perceptive remarks about England and Russia to suggest a similar lack of convergence of the people-nation with the nation-state, even though the specific divergences were different in each case.⁵ Clearly, a lot depends on how political parties and leaders, mobilizing the support of specific groups and classes, act strategically in a given historical situation. That is the source of the inevitable unpredictability of the actual unfolding of historical events. This history cannot be reduced to a simple linear narrative.

There are many layers of possibility contained within the concept of state sovereignty. As is well known, modern state formations in Europe began, from the late seventeenth century, to claim unique sovereign jurisdiction over physical resources and people within mutually agreed territorial boundaries clearly marked on maps and, through the next couple of centuries, enforced on the ground. These state formations were not necessarily national. The concept of unique territorial sovereignty was transported to other parts of the world by European imperial powers who claimed, exchanged, and recognized one another's colonial possessions through treaties among themselves in which the local rulers of conquered territories had no role to play. The most infamous such treaty was signed at the Berlin Conference of 1885 by which the European powers divided up West Africa along longitudes and latitudes. Indeed, in many parts of the world today, the borders of states are the accidental results of colonial history. These sovereign territorial jurisdictions were inherited from modern colonial states; they were not created by people-nations.

Dispersing Sovereignty

This is where anticolonial nationalism has often innovated new structures and practices of sovereignty. Let me point to some examples from India because that is the case I know best. But other examples can be found from postcolonial states elsewhere. British India was divided into large administrative provinces that were multilingual. This territory was partitioned into two parts in 1947, the Hindu-majority provinces going to India and Muslim-majority ones to Pakistan. In addition, a third of the country consisted of so-called princely states ruled by local sovereigns who were subordinate to the British paramount power. These states were integrated into India and Pakistan. The result was a jigsaw puzzle of administrative jurisdictions. Pushed by strong regional mass movements, these units of varying sizes were gradually reorganized in India into monolingual states within a federal structure. The language principle was a recognition of the historical reality that the democratic base of anticolonial nationalism had been laid in the "spiritual" domain of culture by means of the dozen or so major regional languages. The specific content of this national culture was different in each language region, but each defined its own place within a broader democratic formation called the Indian nation. In other words, there were several

⁵ Gramsci, "Notebook 4, Section 49," 204–05.

people-nations that came together in a federation within a nation-state whose territorial limits had been inherited from the colonial state.⁶ This is one way in which state sovereignty may be territorially dispersed to accommodate variations in large cultural formations. It is premised on a certain malleability in the imagination of the people-nation that retains its distinct cultural identity while accepting a place of equal partnership with other peoples within the same nation-state. Sovereignty is by no means relinquished; it is territorially and demographically rearranged.

But even monolingual states will have demographic minorities of different kinds. In India, several categories of constitutional provisions have been devised to protect the rights of minorities. Linguistic minorities within monolingual states frequently demand and obtain the right to be educated in their own languages. For those groups that claim a distinct cultural identity but are too small in number to form a viable state within the federation, there are autonomous councils elected by these groups that can legislate on specific matters relating to their small areas. But there are other minorities that are thinly distributed and do not have any territorial concentrations. Two significant such categories are historically oppressed castes and tribes, and religious minorities. Castes that were once considered untouchable and tribal communities have reserved seats in legislatures to which only they can be elected. They also have reserved positions in government employment and educational institutions. Religious minorities have their own laws of marriage and inheritance and the right to run their own institutions of education. These are all qualifications to the equal application of sovereign law by the state over its citizens.

This is by no means to claim that such disaggregation of state sovereignty over territory and populations necessarily resolves all conflicts between culturally constituted groups within a nation-state. I am only too aware, for instance, of the continuing debates in India over the distribution of federal powers between the central government and the states, or of explosive conflicts between ethnic majorities and minorities in different regions, or indeed of the attempt by Hindu nationalists to assert the primacy of a Hindu majority over the whole country. All I am saying is that the choice is not between having state sovereignty and abolishing it.

Diasporic Nationalism

Keeping the specific condition of the Jewish people in mind, Boyarin makes an eloquent case for a diasporic nation that can thrive without a state. "What if nations do not have to take the form of states?" he asks. One could respond by saying that many culturally distinct people, despite having every attribute of nationality, have accepted that they do not have the numbers or the territorial concentration or the economic wherewithal or the political opportunity to

⁶ I have argued this at greater length in a short article entitled "A Relativist View of the Indian Nation," in *Rethinking Social Justice*, eds. S. Anandhi, Karthick Ram Manoharan, M. Vijayabaskar and A. Kalaiyaran (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020), xv–xxviii.

become nation-states. I am not speaking of peoples like the Palestinians or the Kurds or the Kashmiris, whose aspirations for a nation-state continue to be frustrated by historical circumstances. I am referring to numerous other groups who live within nation-states in which they are national minorities, whether recognized and protected in some manner or unrecognized and marginalized.

And then there are people who have the attributes of nationality but are scattered over several nation-states. Some of these people have a nation-state that they call their mother country but live elsewhere as citizens of other states. They may or may not have dual citizenship. If they do, their legal obligations toward the two states may be defined by specific treaties. If they don't, they may continue to have a strong sense of cultural solidarity with the people of the mother country without, however, affecting in any way their status as citizen-subjects of the sovereign state in which they live. All of these possibilities are currently available within the range of options offered by sovereign states.

Which is the possibility Boyarin prefers for the Jewish people? From his rather unorthodox account of the history of Zionism, it would seem that he prefers the direction pointed out by Ahad Ha'am who, according to Boyarin, dreamed of a culturally vibrant Jewish diaspora with its epicenter in Palestine where the Jewish and Palestinian nations would have equal rights and shared sovereignty. As far as I can see, such a political rearrangement of the Jewish people-nation would not imply the abandonment of state sovereignty as such but rather a complete, and at this time utterly impossible, rejection of the sovereign claim of the state of Israel as *the* state of the Jewish people. In other words, I don't see that Boyarin's endorsement of Ahad Ha'am's vision leads to any general propositions about deterritorialized nationalism.

But there is something important in Boyarin's emphasis on the stakes a diaspora must have in a nationalism of autonomy that acknowledges and respects the cultural rights of other nations living within the same state. This is indeed contrary to the nationalism that insists on the primacy of a cultural majority to the exclusion of others. In particular, one must note the vastly increased possibilities of cultural mobilization among diasporic populations in these days of digital communication. However, such mobilizations can work in the direction of inclusion and autonomy just as they can bolster majoritarianism and exclusion. As an Indian, I am only too aware of the difference between the two nationalisms. The battle is being fought out today between those who believe that India should be a Hindu nation-state and others who see it as a country of diverse people who have agreed to live together as equal partners in a federal republic. Neither side ignores the reality of territorial sovereignty. But they have very different ideas on how to assemble it.

Author biography. Partha Chatterjee is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies, Columbia University, New York, and Honorary Professor, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. (Email: pc281@columbia.edu)

Cite this article: Chatterjee, Partha. 2022. "Nation and Sovereignty: A Response to Boyarin." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 67–71. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2021.28>