

The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics, 1870–1919

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Discussing *The Psychology of Nationalism and Internationalism*, the American academic Walter Pillsbury estimated that:

Probably no word has been spoken more often in the political discussions of recent years than the word ‘nation’ or ‘nationality’. No principle has been more frequently referred to by all sides in arguing for right and wrong than that each nation is entitled to settle its own affairs. [\(1\)](#)

According to the US psychologist, nationality was ‘the expression of a mental attitude and the product of experience based upon a fundamental instinct’.[\(2\)](#) Writing at a point when the world emerged from prolonged and violent conflict, he affirmed the desirability of a League of Nations, but qualified that ‘no wider state is conceivable except as an organization of the present national states’. [\(3\)](#) Pillsbury is one of the intellectuals whose work features in Glenda Sluga’s original and insightful study *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics, 1870-1919*.[\(4\)](#) His comments neatly encapsulate a central theme of Sluga’s book, namely the extent to which conceptions of nationhood and psychology were closely intertwined in the eyes of many contemporaries at the beginning of the 20th century. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 epitomises this entanglement: officials and intellectuals debated plans for a ‘scientific peace’ that was partly premised on a belief in the measurability of nationhood. Appeals to ‘national consciousness’, the ‘free will of peoples’ and their right to ‘self-determination’ took centre stage and thus adapted concepts from the realm of psychology to the discourse of a new world order.

Drawing on contemporary publications as well as diplomatic records, Glenda Sluga's book marks an important contribution to the transnational history of the idea of the nation, especially with regard to the latter's role in international politics. Her monograph is organised in an unusual yet effective way: the first two of five chapters focus on the debates on peace-building during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. These ideas and plans are subsequently contextualised in two thematic chapters with a broader chronological perspective – one of them considers concepts of nationhood in relation to the rise of psychology from 1870, and the other one looks at gender and nationhood. The final chapter pulls these strands together by returning to the years between 1914 and 1919, pointing at the privileging of nationhood over gender in the schemes to organise international relations. In Sluga's book, 'Paris 1919' hence serves as the departure point for an intellectual journey towards the intersection of science, culture and politics.

The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics mostly focuses on French, British and American intellectuals and policymakers who contemplated and discussed the conditions for peace-building during and after the First World War – people labelled 'progressives' in the US context, 'solidaristes' in France and 'New Liberals' in Britain.⁽⁵⁾ Many of them were involved in state projects or institutions such as the US government's 'Inquiry', the French *Comité d'Etudes* and the British Political Intelligence Department. In some cases, they were also associated with intellectual outlets such as the British journal *The New Europe* or pacifist associations such as E. D. Morel's Union of Democratic Control (UDC). Sluga shows that, despite pronounced differences concerning war aims or post-war planning, many intellectuals agreed on the primacy of nationhood in organising international relations. By tracing their understanding of the nation, Sluga's study offers a fresh perspective to the study of peace-building. Many previous works, including Lawrence Gelfand's classic study of the Inquiry, offer much detail on policy decisions, yet barely investigate the discourse that sustained them.⁽⁶⁾ In this respect, Glenda Sluga directs our view towards often neglected issues, offering building blocks for a cultural history of international politics. This means that some aspects of post-war planning only receive occasional mention: working with a different approach, one might easily comment more extensively on the rapport between nationalism and aims such as the military containment of 'enemy' states or the reconstruction of the post-war economy.

Instead, the monograph initially concentrates on the idea of constructing a world order on the basis of national units. Such ideas were widespread during the war years. For instance, the liberal historian Ramsay Muir – featured in Sluga's book as an associate of *The New Europe* – asserted in 1916 that 'internationalism is necessary as the fulfilment of nationalism. The two are as mutually dependent as Liberty and Law'.⁽⁷⁾ His optimism on the ultimate convergence of nationalism and internationalism in a post-war settlement turned out to be misguided: the redrawing of Europe's map along seemingly 'national' lines lay at odds with, for instance, the multiethnic realities of the former Habsburg lands. Sluga's earlier work on *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border* is a case in point.⁽⁸⁾ *The Nation, Psychology and International Politics* deals with similar ambiguities; it stresses the selectivity inherent in granting 'self-determination' to some but not all groups that claimed it. Hence, it remained the prerogative of 'experts' and policymakers to define what a nation was, where its boundaries were and whether a people's 'self' was sufficiently 'developed' to take charge of its own fate. In many cases, intellectuals constructed or validated hierarchies centred on the notion of a people's different 'developmental stages'. The League of Nations' mandates were one manifestation of this, with their division into A, B and C mandates according to their perceived level of 'civilisation'. Sluga convincingly highlights that 'tutelage' was the flip side of affirming the importance of a people's 'free will'. This was particularly relevant when appealing to such principles on a global scale: as Sluga points out, peacemakers applied 'two versions of nationality, one relevant to Western European states, the other to elsewhere'.⁽⁹⁾

After the First World War, the 'identification' and 'assessment' of nations assumed particular significance with regard to the former parts of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, thereby boosting the position of scholars such as Robert Seton-Watson, co-founder of the School of Slavonic Studies at King's College London and editor of *The New Europe*. The presumptuousness of carving nation-states out of the remnants of these empires is depicted by an episode recounted by Sluga: speaking to a representative of the Lazistan

district, Arnold Toynbee pointed out that the delegate was ‘mistaken in thinking that he is a Turk. Toynbee confidently exposed him as, instead, “really a Moslem Georgian!”’.(10) Toynbee was only one of several prominent historians involved in providing advice on the post-war order – James T. Shotwell at Columbia University and Harold Temperley in Cambridge were also involved in such endeavours. While the relation between history-writing and nation-building is well-known,(11) Sluga’s book considers this nexus from a fresh angle: it shows how historians formed part of a community of intellectuals and engaged in debates on the nature of international relations. As Ian Tyrell has suggested, the activities of Shotwell and other US historians can be placed in the wider context of historians ‘going public’ – in policy debates but also in history’s relation with other disciplines.(12)

In this respect, it is striking how psychology, as a relatively recent academic subject, influenced the work of historians and politicians alike, namely by ‘psychologising’ the nation. Scholarly studies, popular science and political discourse represented nations as psychological phenomena – and Glenda Sluga has unearthed an impressively wide-ranging array of sources that illustrate this. Even though commentators such as Walter Bagehot and Ernest Renan, and social psychologists such as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde disagreed on whether national characteristics were innate or acquired, their writing implied the relevance of psychological categories for the study of nations. The epilogue of Sluga’s book makes the point that the legacy of such seemingly scientific explanations continued throughout the 20th century. The most enlightening and original aspect of her work, however, is the way in which she connects the significance of ‘psychology’ in perceptions of nationhood with the sphere of international relations. If psychology impacted on our understanding of nationhood and if the principle of nationality played a central role in the peace negotiations of 1919, one will find many linkages between psychology and international politics.

Sluga’s emphasis on these connections is far from anachronistic: her book offers a wealth of evidence on how intellectuals from opposing camps explicitly referred to the relevance of psychology in regard to international relations at the time. As pointed out in her book, only a few observers were as perceptive as Wilson’s former collaborator Walter Lippmann, who criticised the focus on ‘collective minds, national souls, and race psychology’ as the ‘democratic El Dorado’.(13) Moreover, the focus on the nation as a psychological phenomenon contributed to the gendered nature of the international sphere. This was apparent in Pillsbury’s depiction of nations as ‘an enlargement of the family, and the state a development of the paternal authority’.(14) If international relations themselves were built on the basis of such ‘families’, it meant that ‘paternalism’ – for instance with regard to peoples that were deemed less ‘cultivated’ – went beyond being merely implicit. At the same time, Sluga also highlights how ‘gender’ became reflected in the ‘equation of womanish souls with inferior nations’ – a likeness which intellectuals as diverse as Maurice Barrès and (during his tenure as president of Princeton University) Woodrow Wilson made.(15)

Nonetheless, *The Nation, Psychology and International Politics* shows that the peace process and the debates sustaining it were more complex: women campaigners such as Rosika Schwimmer and Jane Addams challenged the status quo by asserting that a future world order should also include equal rights for women and guarantee universal suffrage. The British pacifist Helena Swanwick and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (whose origins date back to the 1915 anti-war congress at The Hague) presented the cases for gender equality and for pacifism as interrelated concerns. In this respect, the language of self-determination acted as a stimulus for people aiming to subvert existing gender orders. Diplomats’ unwillingness to consider questions of women’s suffrage in the debates of ‘self-determination’ highlights the ambiguities of liberal internationalism and the problem of applying such concepts in a consistent way.

In light of the multiple challenges to the hegemonic discourse, *The Nation, Psychology and International Politics* could have cited further attacks on the status quo – for instance, the way in which the language of self-determination could help to criticise the conceptual underpinnings of the national principle at both the domestic and the international level. Sluga’s study briefly mentions W. E. B. DuBois and the Pan-African Congress of 1919, which directly addressed the civilisational notions upon which the post-war conception was based.(16) Similar observations may apply to the question of class: on the one hand, franchise reform

was treated as being independent from peace negotiations – yet at the same time, with the creation of the International Labour Organization, such issues also became the concern of international institutions. Related to the sphere of psychology, one might consider the relation between class and a fear of the masses – especially with the evocation of ‘mobs’ in the type of psychological literature popularised by Le Bon. [\(17\)](#)

Finally, as Sluga’s work concentrates on French, British and American debates, it would be worthwhile to address similar debates among intellectuals and politicians from the Central Powers. How did nationalism in German academia feed into conceptions of international relations – especially in light of Wilsonian internationalism being associated with the unpopular settlement of Versailles? Furthermore, if the national settlement envisaged during and after the war was linked to key tenets of modernity – namely nationalism and psychology – where did this leave the Habsburg Monarchy? After all, the latter was shaped by an uneasy mixture of dynastic rule, competing nationalisms, artistic modernism and – significant in the context of Sluga’s work – the rise of psychoanalysis at the *fin de siècle*. Considering yet another angle, one might also wonder whether nationalism in German-speaking lands contradicted the beliefs of internationalists in the Allied states – did the latter therefore use the language of national ‘pathology’ to prevent German nationalism from undermining the ultimate value of a post-war order based on national units?

Any innovative study is likely to generate further questions. *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics* is successful in doing so and, at the same time, a thoroughly engaging book in its own right. The interrelation between nationalism and liberal internationalism may seem self-evident but there has been very little scholarship that explores the exact nature of their relationship. Glenda Sluga’s work rectifies this and does so in a thoughtful and refreshing way.

The author thanks Daniel Laqua for his careful and thoughtful review.

Notes

1. W. B. Pillsbury, *The Psychology of Nationalism and Internationalism* (New York, 1919), p. 1. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Pillsbury, *The Psychology of Nationalism*, p. 126. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Pillsbury, *The Psychology of Nationalism*, p. 307. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. G. Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics, 1870-1919* (Basingstoke, 2006). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics*, p. 6. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. L. Gelfand, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917-1919* (New Haven, Conn., 1963). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. R. Muir, *Nationalism and Internationalism: the Culmination of Modern History* (London, 1916), p. 224. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. G. Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border. Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in 20th-Century Europe* (Albany, N.Y., 2001). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics*, p. 35. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics*, p. 16. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. See e.g. S. Berger, M. Donovan and K. Passmore, *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (London, 1999). [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. This is the title of an essay in *Historians in Public: the Practice of American History, 1890-1970*, ed. I. Tyrell (Chicago, Ill., 2006). [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, 1946 [orig. 1922]), p. 26, as cited in Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology and International Politics*, pp. 1 and 9. [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Pillsbury, *The Psychology of Nationalism*, p. 6. [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics*, pp. 84-5. [Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Another example is the way in which groups in India, Korea, China and Egypt used the language of national self-determination in their quest for self-government, as shown in Erez Manela’s recent study

on *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007). [Back to \(16\)](#)

17. See, e.g., Pillsbury's comments on 'The nation and the mob consciousness', in *The Psychology of Nationalism*, p. 164. [Back to \(17\)](#)

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