The Paradoxes of Nationalism

The French Revolution
and Its Meaning for
Contemporary Nation Building

Chimène I. Keitner

THE PARADOXES OF NATIONALISM

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For Idan

"La Nation consentie, voulue par elle-même" (The Nation consented to, self-willed) *was France's contribution to history.*

—Eric Hobsbawm, quoting
historian Ernest Lavisse

I love all men; I particularly love all free men; but I love the free men of France better than all other men in the universe.

—François Robert to the National
Convention, April 26, 1793

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Prologue

Paris, June 1789

A monarchy on the brink of bankruptcy. Short on options, Louis XVI convokes the Estates-General, a meeting of delegates from all over France, for the first time since 1614. As in 1614, delegates are summoned from France's three "estates": the nobility, the clergy, and the so-called Third Estate, which encompasses almost everyone else. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the Third Estate's delegates are lawyers.

The deputies from the Third Estate are not as accommodating as they apparently had been in 1614. They want a voice in the proceedings commensurate with the size of their constituent base, which vastly outnumbers the nobility and the clergy combined. On June 17, after long debates, they adopt a resolution naming themselves the National Assembly and establishing the principle of national consent as a prerequisite for government action.[1]

Not all of the deputies' concerns are so lofty. One delegate, Doctor Joseph Ignace Guillotin, draws the Assembly's attention to a more basic issue, ventilation: "The heavy and pestilential air emanating from the body of more than three thousand individuals packed into the room will inevitably produce a mortal effect on all the deputies!"[2] (Though perhaps not as mortal as the invention later named for the doctor.) Dr. Guillotin is put in charge of finding and configuring a proper meeting space. Even the most basic nation-building tasks require logistical support.

In their resolution of June 17, the deputies from the Third Estate recognized and entrenched the political power of nationhood—a theoretical gesture with important practical implications. French—and, ultimately, world—politics would never be quite the same again.

The struggle for self-government has animated, and continues to animate, some of history's most intractable conflicts. This book focuses on one "self"—the nation—that has emerged and endured as a platform for political and territorial claims. The principle of national self-determination has often been honored in the breach, for example, as a basis for redrawing boundaries in the wake of the two world wars. Even so, the idea that human beings with shared understandings and traditions can be divided into territorial groupings called nations, and that nations are most strongly entitled and best equipped to govern their own states, continues to provide one of the most powerful arguments for reconfiguring political and territorial boundaries, from Gaza and the West Bank, to (now independent) East Timor, to the Basque Country, to Kashmir, to Kurdistan. Each nation's quest for self-determination is steeped in complexities linked to its own unique historical, religious, cultural, and linguistic context, but all seek to derive legitimacy from—and to implement—a basic proposition: to each nation, its own state.

National self-determination, though notoriously problematic, represents a core, constitutive principle of international politics. It holds that every "nation," a unified community of people with a desire and capacity for self-governance, is entitled to exclusive control of its own territorial state.[3] Its corollary is the nation-state principle: the idea that nations and states are or should be congruent. The nation-state principle is centrally, if ambiguously, embedded in the international legal order.[4] It gives rise to powerful, informal sets of understandings that can both legitimize and delegitimize states, depending on how the component groups of a state's population define their national identity. A state with a unified national population can seek to derive strength from such unity, for example, in times of war. Thus, it is often in wartime that leaders deploy the most nationalistic and even "jingoistic" political ideology and rhetoric. Similarly, the lack of a unified national identity can be exploited by groups seeking to overturn the political and territorial status quo, as illustrated by various "separatist" movements around the globe.

The continued resonance of national self-determination as a political principle and rallying point for political and territorial claims has been and remains evident in separatist or "sovereigntist" movements, which seek to carve out control of part of an existing state (as in Québec or Kosovo). It can also manifest itself in "irredentist" movements, which seek to unify a national population that is claimed to exist within multiple states (such as German and Italian unification movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Some movements are difficult to classify; for example, the

creation of a Kurdish state would have both separatist and irredentist features. They also confront the inevitable challenge of conflicting national definitions: Is being Québecois a national identity, or is it a provincial identity within the national identity of Canada? These questions are complex and often defy objective or straightforward answers.

This book is one contribution to the cumulative endeavor of deepening our understanding of national self-determination and its implications as a basis for international political order. While the substance of the first four chapters is largely historical, this is not a work of history. I spend more time examining French Revolutionary history than would most international relations theorists, and less time than would (and have) historians of the period. This is because I use the exegesis of key Revolutionary texts and events to ground the development of a theoretical framework for identifying and examining some of the persistent problems of nationalism and "nation-building" in the modern world. The purpose of the work is thus both theoretical and pragmatic: to interpret and distill past phenomena in an effort to better identify, and hopefully avoid, some of the pitfalls associated with building and legitimizing nation-states.

Examining the Nation-State Principle

Before turning to the French Revolution, it is worth canvassing some salient aspects of the nation-state model. This model prescribes that each self-identified nation should have exclusive control of a single, uninational state. Any arrangement short of sovereign statehood is, by definition, suboptimal. This is because a belief in the primacy of the nation (as opposed to any other form of human association) leads logically to the goal of political independence as a sovereign nation-state, allowing the nation most fully to regulate its own internal affairs, and to institutionalize its separate existence vis-à-vis other nation-states. In practice, power-sharing alternatives within existing multinational states will be more or less appealing depending on demographic patterns (the geographical distribution and concentration of national groups) and economic factors (the economic viability of separate national units). In theory, however, the nation-state model holds out sovereign statehood as the ultimate form of political recognition and territorial control.[5]

Despite its apparent simplicity in theory, the nation-state model defies tidy implementation. Most states in the world today are not, strictly speaking, nation-states. The tenacity of the nation-state idea, despite the widespread incongruity between theory and practice, makes this idea particularly

intriguing and worthy of investigation.[6] In practice, multinational states and transnational processes are pervasive, and the international community remains reluctant to uphold new claims to separate statehood, except when presented with a fait accompli. Yet the myth of a general right of national self-determination persists, and has even been upheld as a peremptory norm of international law.[7] As long as the nation-state idea informs the perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and attitudes of actual and would-be international actors (whether or not it is widely corroborated by the geopolitical status quo), it will continue to shape the limits of our international political imagination, providing grounds for competing claims to power and compromising the attractiveness of alternative, non-state options for self-identified nations seeking greater internal control and external recognition.

The persistent fiction of a world of nation-states and its embedded assumptions also affect how we discuss politics and international relations. In scholarly literature, both political theory and international relations (IR) theory tend to take for granted that we live in a world of nation-states. The frequent failure properly to interrogate this assumption represents a serious oversight.[8] The tendency to use the terms "nation" and "state" interchangeably encapsulates a common understanding, or rather *mis*understanding, of the foundations of existing states in the contemporary international system.[9] Although the dominant understanding of this system is essentially state-based, nations and states are by no means universally congruent, and disputes over political and territorial control remain a central source of international conflict. With the widespread rejection of conquest and colonialism as legitimate grounds for maintaining political and territorial control, state leaders have had to turn elsewhere to legitimate their authority and foster compliance and stability.

The idea of national self-determination affirms the value of self-government (presumably, though not necessarily, democratic), and the particular political relevance of the nation, as opposed to any other form of human association. Many other political configurations could be, and have been, envisaged, from city-states to multinational empires. The doctrine of national self-determination encapsulates a commitment to national self-government concretized in the rule of "one nation, one state." As a corollary, it posits sovereign nation-states as the units whose patterns of interaction constitute "international" relations (even though, increasingly, the rights of individuals have been deemed a matter of inclusive international concern).

In theory, the nation-state principle provides a standard for resolving disputes over political and territorial arrangements: nations and states

should be congruent. In this formulation, congruence is not simply a matter of convenience. Sovereignty and inviolability, the hallmarks of nation-statehood, are justified based on two central criteria: (1) effectiveness, and (2) legitimacy. A nation-state is presumed to be *effective* at maintaining order and a monopoly on the use of force within its borders; it is presumed to be *legitimate*, because it can credibly embody a self-identified and self-determining nation.

From a nation-statist perspective, the state by itself has virtually no independent constitutive power: it relies for its content and its justification on the existence and continued support of a self-determining nation. The state provides the vehicle through which the nation exercises sovereignty and enshrines its own independent status vis-à-vis other nations in the international system. The state is the shell; the nation, the substance. The content (the nation) justifies and dictates the form (the state), providing an ethical basis for the attributes of sovereignty and inviolability. These attributes, in turn, can be justified most convincingly by the idea (or the illusion) of states as the embodiments of groups of individuals distinguished by a particular shared conception of the good, rather than by arbitrary territorial divisions created and maintained by force.[10] Nations can therefore be seen as giving nation-states an ethical content, providing "bottom-up" legitimating criteria for what is sometimes referred to as the "Westphalian" model of an international system of sovereign states.

In constituting and demarcating domestic political space, the nation-state principle also defines and configures the international system. In a nation-statist system, the domestic and international spheres are envisaged as distinct and governed by different rules and expectations. The nation-state is assumed to be based on a "thicker" and more substantive consensus among its members rooted in their shared national identity, whereas international institutions derive their legitimacy from procedural agreements that encompass the wide range of diverse and potentially contradictory self-understandings of their component nation-states.

In a nation-statist perspective, the top-down idea of statehood without the bottom-up support of nationhood would be insufficient to justify ethically the core prerogatives of sovereignty and inviolability.[11] In other words, states need nations just as much as nations need states. Of course, historically, states have often preceded nations, with administrative centralization and linguistic homogenization creating the conditions for forging a common political and even cultural identity. But strict nation-statists tend to assume (or to "imagine") that nations exist independently of their corresponding states, making the idea of the nation a more powerful legitimating

platform. As nationalist political leaders have discovered, the ability to appeal to the idea of a nation, however historically questionable it may be, is a prerequisite for invoking national self-determination as a basis for adjudicating amongst rival political and territorial claims.

On a rhetorical level, states invoke the attributes of sovereignty and inviolability to defend themselves from internal and external political and territorial challenges. On the ethical level, these prerogatives (at least in a nation-statist framework) seem to rely on the assumption that existing states represent and embody self-determining nations. This leads to the puzzling result that states may rely for their legitimacy on a principle that can also be invoked to undermine that legitimacy, and to challenge their political and territorial integrity. It would seem that states are strongest when they can viably assert a unified national identity, and most vulnerable when they can be challenged by one or more substate groups whose members have stronger and denser ties of identification and loyalty with other members of the same substate group than they do with the larger state. This tension between an existing state's ability to invoke the nation-state idea to legitimate its existence, and substate groups' ability to invoke the same idea to challenge existing states, lies at the heart of the contemporary international system.

If nations are to legitimize (or delegitimize) states, the question arises: how to identify nations? Debates about the criteria for nationhood are never-ending, but Alfred Cobban's suggestion that "[t]he best we can say is 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" offers a reasonable starting point.[12] Nations are generally imagined as nonpolitical in nature; states are the political and territorial structures that nations inhabit or seek to create. Whether one subscribes to a view of nations as preexisting entities in the world, or to a more historically evolutionist narrative of nation-formation, the idea that human beings are divided into relatively coherent and cohesive groupings based on shared languages, practices, beliefs, experiences, characteristics, memories, and aspirations,[13] and that these groupings are not necessarily congruent with—and can be identified separately from—existing state institutions, underlies the commitment to reflecting these divisions as closely as possible in global political and territorial arrangements.

The puzzle of how individuals could share national bonds prior to the experience of living together may force recourse to a kind of political "creationism," in which nations are imagined as preexisting entities separate from state institutions. This somewhat ahistorical idea of preexisting

solidarity remains the foundation of arguments for the ethical primacy of nationhood, and for creating congruence between nations and states where this does not already exist.[14] Although assimilation historically might underlie many culturally unified nation-states, national identity is rarely, if ever, acknowledged as an artifice or a deliberate creation. This is largely because the idea of a preexisting nation plays an important justificatory role in the nation-state model (as opposed to the state-nation, or the multinational state). While attempting to determine the conceptual relationship between the nation and the state might seem like the riddle of the chicken and the egg, the ability to imagine the nation as separate from the state becomes central when the nation is upheld as an independent standard for the legitimacy of the state. Nationalist arguments based on the idea of a preexisting, internally cohesive nation may become particularly salient when they seek to challenge, rather than reinforce, the political and territorial boundaries of an existing state.

Different nationalist arguments may appeal to different kinds of allegedly preexisting bonds among members of a nation: those that may be acquired, and those that are innate. This leads to a perceived distinction between "civic" nationalism, which is portrayed as liberal, inclusive, and moderate, and "ethnic" nationalism, which is portrayed as illiberal, exclusionary, and extremist. Chapter five examines this distinction and its implications in greater detail. At this juncture, it is sufficient to note this perceived distinction between what can perhaps more accurately be termed "voluntarist" and "nonvoluntarist" models. Voluntarist nations are especially interesting because they seem to offer grounds for social cohesion, territorial delineation, and political mobilization that are maximally inclusive and minimally predetermined. For this reason, a persistent question throughout this book is: can voluntarist nations fulfill this "liberal" promise?

It is difficult to imagine how voluntarist nations could fit into the framework established by the nation-state principle: the idea that there are preexisting nations that merit having their own territorial states. On a conceptual level, the question of what criteria one could point to as evidence of the existence of a voluntarist nation separate from an existing state remains unresolved, suggesting a difficulty with this category itself. It seems much more straightforward to conceive of an ethnic or nonvoluntarist nation as existing prior to or separate from a given state. For example, during the 1998–99 crisis in Kosovo, the Kosovar Albanians could be thought of as an entity distinguishable from the Serbs, even though they were politically and territorially part of Serbia. Thinking of the Kosovar Albanians as a distinct group might have been facilitated by

the existence of the Kosovar Liberation Army and Kosovar political leaders, even if these did not speak with a monolithic voice. But the ability to conceive of the Kosovar Albanians as forming a cohesive entity did and does not depend on these organizational or administrative trappings.

This mental exercise of separating a nation from its institutions becomes more difficult when the predominant characteristics that define the nation's members are not readily apparent. Ethnicity itself may be largely a matter of subjective definition or invention, but it still seems more concretely ascertainable than other membership criteria or characteristics. For example, I, a Caucasian, would be unable to self-identify as ethnically Japanese. In this sense, I could not belong to the Japanese nation if this were defined nonpolitically as based on shared ethnic traits (even if, depending on citizenship policies, I could become a member of the Japanese state). If membership in a nation cannot be chosen, that nation may be characterized as nonvoluntarist.

Voluntarist nations, by contrast, may be more porous, because their membership criteria ostensibly involve characteristics that are willed or acquired, rather than innate. Language is often upheld as a voluntarist criterion since languages may be learned, even though native speakers are generally distinguishable from those who acquire a language later in life. However, the qualitative distinction between voluntarist and nonvoluntarist membership criteria is not clear-cut: I, a French speaker, could perhaps claim to be a self-identified member of the Québec nation even though I was born in Ontario and grew up in an anglophone household, but it is less certain that all self-identified Québec nationalists would automatically accept me as a member of the Québec nation, whether or not I supported their political cause.

National cohesiveness need not be based on characteristics that are perceived as innate, such as race or ethnicity. It does, however, need to be based on some perceived or actual shared understandings and characteristics among members that distinguish them from nonmembers. These shared understandings and characteristics provide the basis for a common identity, sense of commitment, and willingness to comply with rules established by members of the nation or its chosen leaders. These requirements can be referred to as cohesion, commitment, and compliance. Without cohesion, commitment, and compliance, there is little hope that a self-identified group will be able to establish effective and legitimate internal political institutions, let alone claim the external prerogatives of sovereignty and inviolability in the face of potentially competing claims. The question for proponents of voluntarist nationalism is:

in a voluntarist nation, where do cohesion, commitment, and compliance come from? Could a voluntarist nation ever challenge an existing state?

One can always seek to create cohesion, commitment, and compliance in existing states. This is, in fact, how many well-established states have been formed.[15] This "state-nation" idea, however, is intrinsically conservative, since it seeks to reinforce the effectiveness and legitimacy of existing states. The nation-state idea, by contrast, can be revolutionary, since it enables nations to challenge the political composition and territorial boundaries of existing states.

Mindful of this revolutionary potential, states in the international community have embraced the liberationist rhetoric of self-determination, but they have not accepted the destabilizing implications of implementing the nation-state model in favor of substate groups demanding political independence. The "principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" is enshrined in Article 1, paragraph 2, and Article 55 of the United Nations Charter; General Assembly Resolution 1514 on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960); General Assembly Resolution 2625 on the Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States (1970); and the 1966 International Covenants on Human Rights.[16] The practical implications of the nation-statist imperative in an international system comprised of multiethnic and multinational states are threatening, to say the least. It is therefore not surprising that championing self-determination has largely meant displacing colonial leaders, rather than redrawing colonial boundaries. The international rhetoric of self-determination has not been accompanied by support for self-determination movements that seek to modify state borders, and not just displace colonial rule.

Perhaps the closest flirtation with a widespread implementation of the nation-state idea came in the wake of the First World War. In 1919–20, a number of arguments were made in support of nation-states over empires: the idea that large empires are exploitative and undemocratic, the hope that national self-determination would reduce the incidence of conflict, and the general feeling that "small is beautiful."[17] Unfortunately for its advocates, this nation-based conception was virtually impossible to implement in practical terms, as U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State Robert Lansing foresaw, and his colleagues realized, during the Paris peace negotiations.[18]

Setting aside the interests of colonial powers that kept them from advocating the uniform application of this principle in postwar territorial and political arrangements, even negotiators devoted to the idea of

national self-determination would have been hard pressed to ascertain exactly what that commitment entailed. Definitional problems abounded. The lack of agreed-upon criteria for nationhood makes top-down solutions difficult. Plebiscites can be problematic, particularly if national boundaries are contested to begin with: how to decide who is entitled to have an authoritative say in determining the political status of a given territory or population? A given territory is not necessarily a nation;[19] self-identified members of a single nation do not necessarily inhabit the same territory; and resettlement policies may fundamentally alter the demographic balance in a region, creating tensions between historical claims and the situation on the ground.

It is also far from clear that implementing the nation-state principle, were this possible, would promote international stability. From an international order perspective, the argument for national self-determination tends to assume that nation-states will, by definition, be territorially satiated, and thus coexist more peacefully than states built on other principles. By contrast, multinational states would face threats of rebellion and secession, and nations straddling state borders might pursue policies of consolidation based on irredentist aspirations. However, the contestability of national boundaries means that national self-determination does not, in fact, avoid these problems.[20] To the contrary, in a world *not* composed of nation-states, the clash between the principles of national self-determination and existing state sovereignty might turn out to be "a recipe for international disorder" by inciting more disputes than it resolves.[21] On a basic level, the principle of national self-determination begs the question "What are nations?," thus failing to specify the circumstances under which particular groups can legitimately challenge state borders: that is, when they can justifiably violate the very principles of state sovereignty and inviolability that make statehood attractive in the first place.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Common Article 1 of the 1966 Covenants affirms: "All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of this right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development."[22] It seems difficult to imagine how a group could "freely determine [its] political status" without the possibility of independent statehood, but this is precisely the option that existing states have sought to preclude, both within and alongside the United Nations framework. In his 1992 *Agenda for Peace*, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Gali identified this tension without, however, resolving it:

> The sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of States within the established international system, and the principle of self-determination for peoples, both of great value and importance, must not be permitted to work against each other in the period ahead. Respect for democratic principles at all levels of social existence is crucial: in communities, within States and within the community of States. Our constant duty should be to maintain the integrity of each while finding a balanced design for all.[23]

Consistent with this admonition, the international community's general refusal to endorse outright Kosovar separatism in the winter of 1998–99, while at the same time condemning Serb aggression towards ethnic Albanians in the region, stemmed in no small part from a fear of establishing a precedent of support or even passive legitimation of separatist movements. The resistance to self-determination as a basis for dismantling existing states sits uncomfortably with the affirmation of a right of self-determination of peoples, pointing to a tension at the heart of the contemporary international system.

Closely tied to the idea of a right to national self-determination—and counterbalancing its disruptive potential—is a pervasive fiction that the states in the international system are (or approximate) nation-states: that is, that they should be treated as unitary and, to a large extent, self-enclosed. Paradoxically, an increasing emphasis on human rights and rights to national self-determination also makes the international community more likely to intervene in this self-enclosed space and to legitimate, at least tacitly, certain nation-based political and territorial claims, for example, in the form of election monitoring in places such as East Timor. Even nonmilitary intervention can highlight tensions between the claims of nations and those of existing states. Finding a "balanced design," in Secretary-General Boutros-Gali's words, is a laudable goal, but it remains elusive.

Chapters one through four use the story of the French Revolution to examine these contested concepts, and to explore the uses and abuses of the nation-state idea. Their goal is both theoretical and pragmatic: theoretical, in the sense that discussions of the nation-state idea and national self-determination in political theory and international relations can benefit from a historically informed conceptual analysis; and pragmatic, because the idea of a right to national self-determination continues to animate political and territorial claims and challenges today. Each chapter focuses on a "paradox" in the nation-state idea. The notion of a paradox is intended to evoke the tensions and trade-offs involved in imagining and building nation-states.

The French Revolutionaries did not succeed in endowing their own version of the nation with lasting and exclusive legitimacy, but they did help to enshrine nationhood as a central platform for articulating and contesting claims to political power and territorial control.[24] A deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the French Revolutionaries, and of their responses to these challenges, can help us develop tools to grapple with national self-determination claims in the present, and to evaluate alternative forms of political association for the future. Chapter five explores the tension between voluntarist and nonvoluntarist nationalism in more detail, and chapter six suggests some ways in which these analytical tools can be applied by discussing the contemporary situation in Iraq in terms of the tensions that flow from the nation-state ideal.

Exploring the French Revolution

Chapters one through four focus on a critical stage in the development of the principle of national self-determination: the years of the French Revolution, during which the idea of the nation was fused with that of self-government. Other historical periods and events have also clearly had an impact on ideas of international legitimacy and the configuration of international order, including the Magna Carta, the American Revolution, the Congress of Vienna, and the First World War. Nevertheless, historians and international relations scholars routinely cite the French Revolution as the origin of nationalism and the source of national self-determination. Despite this almost habitual invocation, scholars have by and large failed to explore the implications of this conceptual and historical connection.[25] This book aims, in part, to remedy that omission, and to apply the insights gained from this analysis to contemporary political dilemmas.

In examining the interplay between French Revolutionary rhetoric and nationalist political theory, I draw on three main categories of sources: philosophical, political, and literary texts from the French Revolutionary period; historical works on the French Revolution; and studies of nationalism from the perspectives of international relations, political theory, and international law. While the bodies of secondary literature on the French Revolution and on national self-determination are each enormous, relatively few works explicitly conjoin the two subjects in an attempt to dig more deeply into the assumptions behind and the implications of national self-determination as an international political standard. Tracing the emergence of the French notion of the nation during the Revolutionary period can provide insights into the main virtues and defects of national self-

determination as a basis for domestic and international order, both as these were seen at the time and in their subsequent manifestations.

The key aspect of the French Revolution, from the perspective of this analysis, is the emergence of the nation as a political actor—the holder of sovereignty and the touchstone for political legitimacy. The assumption that there exists a natural connection among nationhood, political legitimacy, and popular emancipation—attributable largely to the French Revolution and its surrounding mythology—has contributed to a widespread presumption in favor of nation-states over other political models, such as empires. We live—or at least *think* we live—in a world of nation-states.

I do not assert that there is some Platonic, unchanging meaning of the term "nation," nor that the French Revolutionary use of this term can be equated in all respects with its use by later self-determination movements. Rather, I contend that the deployment of the concept of nationhood by French Revolutionary thinkers and politicians provides a rich laboratory for exploring this concept and testing its ethical and logical limits. Although political terms do not travel through time unchanged, early formulations of the entitlements of nationhood reveal central, enduring tensions in this political ideal. In particular, the idea of a voluntarist nation, often conflated with that of a democratic state, merits critical scrutiny. From this perspective, this study also contributes to the ongoing exploration of the uneasy relationship between liberalism and nationalism in political theory and international relations.

My approach follows the tradition of historically informed international relations scholarship associated with the English School, viewing international relations as a product of the interaction between doctrines and practice.[26] The configuration of international political life is itself a historical product, forged by processes of construction and interaction that have been underpinned by and also generative of its conceptual justifications. This tends to make strictly empirical or strictly theoretical investigations of principles such as national self-determination somewhat incomplete.[27]

This analysis takes it for granted that ideas matter. In the international arena, international norms provide actors with justifications that shape their political options: they do not prescribe actions, but they do shape the ways in which they can be legitimated. The perceived importance of public opinion (what in eighteenth-century France was called "*le que dira-t-on*") can either fuel or temper nationalist political platforms, depending on the target audience. By concretizing sets of intersubjective understandings, justifications offered by international actors can have a

cumulative effect in reinforcing and pushing forward the development of broader international standards and codes of conduct.[28]

This book, in both its subject matter and its methodology, focuses on the link between principles and practice in international law and politics. Concepts such as national self-determination create expectations and establish legitimating criteria, shaping the way in which international actors articulate and justify political and territorial claims.[29] Just as today the political possibility of secession depends on the acceptance of national self-determination as a legitimate political goal (one recognized informally in shared sets of understandings or formally in international law), so were the political paths available to the French Revolutionaries informed, if not determined, by certain conceptual limits. The transformation of political vocabulary at the time of the French Revolution provides a key entry point to studying the construction of a certain way of thinking about the nation and its entitlements.[30] What Alexis de Tocqueville somewhat derisively termed the "abstract, literary politics" of the Revolution actually represented the core of a new legitimating political discourse.[31] Distinctions between the nation and the state, debates over the proper form of political representation, definitions of citizenship and nationality, and foreign policy dilemmas involving questions of nationhood and sovereignty were central to the French Revolutionary project, and remain basic tensions in building nation-states today.

The French Revolution met with fierce opposition by political elites in the rest of Europe precisely because it was perceived as exporting a new standard of political legitimacy directly at odds with prevailing monarchical and dynastic principles.[32] This uneasiness was not unique to the Revolutionary context. Over a century later, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson realized the unintended consequences of his rhetorical support for national self-determination when representatives of nationalities he had never heard of flocked to him as a champion for their separatist aspirations at the close of the First World War, indicating the potency of ideas in fueling concrete political claims.[33] Russian Revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin found national self-determination a particularly useful platform for fomenting rebellion against the "imperial yoke" of the czarist regime, further assisting the development of this political ideal.[34] The power of national self-determination as a platform for challenging oppressive and colonial rule during the 1960s and 1970s, and during the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, illustrates the broad appeal of this principle in validating the political and territorial aspirations of nations seeking control of their own states.