

## The Concept of 'Nation' and its Influence on the British Design History-Writing

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### مفهوم "الأمة" وتأثيره على كتابة تاريخ التصميم البريطاني

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#### Abstract

The article claims to approach and clarify the concept of 'nation', via different and contradicting, however interesting, scientific routes. This aims at leading to the separation of its derivative term of 'nationalism' from the meaning of 'patriotism'. Both meanings are deeply examined so that their influence on the British design history-writing becomes obvious. The term 'Britishness' (or 'Englishness') of the British design is stretched as a vital issue, as the spirit of the age is proved to be a particularly crucial parameter in terms of influencing the British design historians. However, this issue is profoundly argued especially during the second half of the 20th century when the national character in design was replaced by the international needs and demands of the world markets. All the above have been highlighted with analogous historical evidence. (Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Design history, 'Britishness', Internationalism)

#### ملخص

تزرع هذه المقالة بأنها تتناول مفهوم "الأمة" وتوضيحه بطرق علمية ذات أهمية بالرغم من تعددها وتعارضها. ويهدف هذا إلى الفصل بين اللفظ المشتق منها وهو "القومية" وبين معنى "الوطنية". وتم فحص اللفظين بعمق وبذا أصبح تأثيرهما على كتابة تاريخ التصميم البريطاني واضحا. وتم التوسع في لفظ "البريطانية" (أو "الإنكليزية") في التصميم البريطاني كقضية رئيسية حيث برهنت روح العصر بأنها كانت معيارا حاسما في التأثير على مؤرخي التصميم البريطاني. ولقد تم التركيز على مناقشة القضية في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين عندما انسحبت الصفة الوطنية في التصميم لتفسح المجال لحاجات ولمتطلبات الأسواق العالمية. وقد تمت بلورة كل ما سبق بالسياق التاريخي المصاحب.

What is a nation? This concept is rather nebulous and wide enough to make us proceed to an, in depth, analysis of its meaning. At first, we should actually wonder what we can understand by the word 'nation'. How can a nation be different from a people? What characterizes a nation? All the current and past examinations upon the real meaning of this word through an extensive series of relevant literature, lead us to the conclusion that the spectrum of definitions stated so far is really enormous and none of them has ever been accepted as a generally valid one. There is, though, a very elementary answer to this question which is: the nation is a politically mobilized people.

However, according to historic facts we must admit that there are some specific values to be analyzed and understood in order to reach a high level of knowledge of the nation concept. We take as a reference point the attempt of the sociologist Max Weber for a definition of this versatile concept: "...it is proper to expect from certain groups a specific sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups".<sup>(1)</sup> Though it is a quite unclear and vague statement, as it may also apply

to a family or even a tribe, it gives us the incentive to examine more closely the very word of 'solidarity' of a people. The sense of solidarity in this case revolves around and is sustained mainly by some certain factors which can be found in almost every definition and are generally described as crucial and significant for constituting the structure of a nation: culture, language, historical consciousness, social communication, religion and political goals. These factors acquire a specific significance as a mark of national identity and which make one nation differ from another national entity from case to case. For instance, the religious factor has played a very important role in history and it is right up until the nineteenth century that religion constituted the main difference of Greek and Serbian social groups (Orthodox Christianity) from the Turks (Islam) who, in spite of that, lived together for centuries. On the contrary, the final war between the Greeks and the Turks in Asia Minor in 1922 derived mainly neither from the difference of culture nor the social communication, but simply the chaotic gap of the religious views between the two nations.

The common language has always been known to bridge even religious differences and history has outstanding examples to present (Albanians under the power of the Ottoman Empire had completely different religious views and beliefs from what their conquerors had; however, they were unified and lived along for centuries because of the language element they had in common). Consequently it may not be unwise for us to believe these two fundamental factors – religion and language – can be considered as the main components of the structure of national consciousness and, therefore, the construction of a nation.

A second attempt for a possible definition of a nation turns us to Karl Deutch's thoughts according to which a people is a body of individuals who 'can communicate quickly and effectively with each other over long distances and about a variety of themes and matters'. He also claims that 'this ability of communication between people usually presupposes common roots, that is common language, culture and religion and also common history, the elements that can form the concept of a cultural community on which the formation of a communication society can mainly be based upon. If a people, defined as above, acquires and possesses their own state and holds a certain political power, can be considered as a nation'.<sup>(2)</sup> However, one could strongly argue that the above statement as it stands sounds both unclear and misleading: Deutch implies that a people who has not yet acquired their own autonomous state power, can not be regarded as a nation. But history has always been telling us that a nation may as well exist without its own state (boundaries, definitions, law, etc.) and a state without a unified nation. He also seems to overlook the basic distinction between a cultural and a political nation, which constitutes one of the most important contributions to the enquiries of the nation concept.

A cultural nation is characterized by the sense of a communal spirit which has its foundations on some objective criteria such as common heritage and language, religion, customs and history, tradition and a specific area of settlement and does not necessarily need to be mediated by a national state or any other political form.

On the other hand, the concept of a political nation can be examined through an historic example: France, England and the U.S.A. are three countries where a process of domestic political transformations took place and generated the nation as a community of politically aware people, equal before the law irrespectively of their social or economic position, ethnic origin or even

political beliefs. In this case nation and state seem to be synonymous: the whole system is formed by a uniform administrative and judicial system, a central government, shared political ideas and a basically common language, which make the sovereignty of the people consist the foundation of state power.<sup>(3)</sup>

After all, it is rather difficult to give a valid definition of a nation, but according to the criteria mentioned above a nation could be understood as a social group (people or a section of people) which has become conscious of its coherence, unity and particular interests because of a variety of historically evolved relations in terms of race, language, culture, religion, territory and politics. A nation demands, and possibly needs, to be self-determined unless it has already achieved it through a nation state. In a closer look, it also includes and incorporates different bodies of social action such as a religious community, class or the family concept and this is why it has a universal significance.

The term 'nationalism' derives from the idea of the nation and its importance in shaping history (especially after the second half of the eighteenth century in Western Europe and North America). It is a particularly ambiguous concept as it used to have totally different meanings during the history course. It can be associated with forces striving for political, social, economic and even cultural emancipation as well as with those whose goal is oppression. For instance between 1918 and 1945 nationalism was associated with inhumanity, intolerance and violence. It is, therefore, a concept which conceals within itself extreme opposites and contradictions as it can mean emancipation but oppression, too.<sup>(4)</sup> Nationalism is a concept which seems to be a repository of dangers and opportunities, and because it is so broad and has so many different forms, we may as well assume that it does not exist as such but a multitude of manifestations of nationalism do. In brief, one could not speak about nationalism in singular, but 'nationalisms' in plural. As we can understand, attitudes towards this debatable concept may vary considerably. Patriots are faithful believers in their own nations in a sharp contrast to internationalists who despise nationalism as a primitive, reactionary form of consciousness which is the main source of much human strife and war. Even some patriots are unhappy when the idea of the good of a whole nation prompts socialist governments to nationalize privately-owned industries.

The term 'Britishness' (or 'Englishness') in design history-writing is nothing but the identity of the nationalistic character design acquires once it is being produced in Great Britain. However, the question here could be how design or art can acquire a series of general national characteristics. Is there such a thing at all as a fixed or almost fixed national character in design? Or is it appropriate enough to stress a national point of view so much in appreciating works of art and design? In relevance to the latter we could take in consideration the views of those who are against stressing nationality in art and design: they argue that in an age like ours when communications are so rapid, when science is so advanced, when the mass media are of a high standard of information, everything that glorifies obsolete national differences should be avoided. According to their point of view any approach to art and design should not be nationalistic. But, on the other hand, one could wonder: shouldn't national histories of design be ever written?

The 'Britishness' of British products is merely the reflection of the national identity or, from another point of view, the sense of the nationalistic element that characterizes Britain's

design which, however, does not appear equally distinct in all situations. The spirit of the moment, the age, the era or/and the epoch may either reinforce the national character or repel it. Additionally, national qualities are not certainly fixed or permanent. Many cultural, political, social and economic changes occur every now and then and they go so deeply in the people's consciousness and unconsciousness that may eliminate certain qualities for ever or for a long time and bring out new ones.<sup>(5)</sup>

Consequently, taking in consideration such axioms, we assume that the 'Englishness' of English products can be characterized by contradicting values such as moderation, rationalism, reasonableness, conservation and observation but also fantasy, excitement, imagination and irrationalism. The spirit of the age and the national character in British design co-existed from time to time expressing the national power and pride of Britain through the routes of history. For instance, it was definitely not accidental that Britain first established her national identity in design during the time of the Industrial Revolution when she started becoming the leading nation in terms of technological and scientific achievements and, at the same time, she had already built her huge empire all over the world (though her industrial conquest was indeed the subtler continuation of her material ones). The time when the rationalistic character of British design tried to overlap the traditional form of crafts and created severe changes in the already fixed standard national style in design was definitely the Crystal Palace Great exhibition in 1851 (Hyde Park, London). We ought to stress the point that the social, political and economic situation in Britain was framed by a stodgy and complacent optimism at the time. The country, thanks to the enterprise of merchants and manufacturers (wealthier than ever) and the Eden of a rather successful upper class, governed by a bourgeois queen, managed what no generation before this had achieved.<sup>(6)</sup>



Figure 1. The Crystal Palace Great Exhibition Centre, Hyde Park, London 1851.

On the other hand, the age of the ideological concept of nationalism seemed to coincide with industrialization which meant the destruction or the incorporation of agrarian societies. In general, the main representatives of the national identity of Britain were city or town-based intellectuals (in a broad sense), who imposed their views on the population at large. So the idea of focusing on a movement like this, meant the beginning towards the progression of design along with futuristic nationalistic elements for the mass production concept and set a promising potential for the European design market.<sup>(7)</sup>

Another example can be considered Britain's presence in the field of architecture. This particular area of study needs to be examined through the prism of several more parameters than the socioeconomic, political, religious, technological and cultural ones: the land, geology, climate and material resources played a significant role to the distinctive kinds of vernacular British architecture during the centuries. Looking back to history, the British contribution to the western societies has been stronger in the practical art of building than in the esoteric and decorative arts, especially in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. That is because British masonry used to focus mainly on the absolutely structural aspect of architecture, especially in the rural areas where the progress of the cultural, social and technological innovations was particularly slow. However, the unprecedented boom of the Industrial Revolution in the mid 1760's combined with the new social, intellectual and technological status quo of the Victorian era in the first half of the nineteenth century, inaugurated a brand new approach to the architectural style of the country both in the urban and the rural areas<sup>(8)</sup>.



Figure 2. Typical English rural architecture, 1865.

By the end of the nineteenth century Britain had already established her own national identity in architecture and therefore she seemed predestined to play a leading part in modern architecture, too.<sup>(9)</sup> However, the latter could be a little questionable because in the early twentieth century there was a different expression of British political strength which occurred to be detrimental to the general view of architecture: the democratic rule by committee and majority. Additionally, early modern British architects sought to transcend nationalism. Their aim was to solve design problems in a rational manner using new materials and technologies. Such solutions, they thought, would be universally valid, hence the origin of the label 'international style'. Building today more than ever before is decided by committees and they can never be hoped to be the best judges in matters both of techniques and aesthetics. To demand or merely to license a bold building requires somebody bold. Don't you think such a restriction determines absolutely the freedom of 'Britishness' of the modern British architecture? For many design historians the British success of a new venture depended mainly on the lucky accident of some individuals who believed in it, who had the strength of character and were able, at the same time, to handle committees. The most appropriate case was this of Frank Pick at the London Passenger Transport Board who managed to impose his personal views of 'Englishness' in London Transport planning, which, however, coincided and was successfully combined with the international modernism element of the time.<sup>(10)</sup>

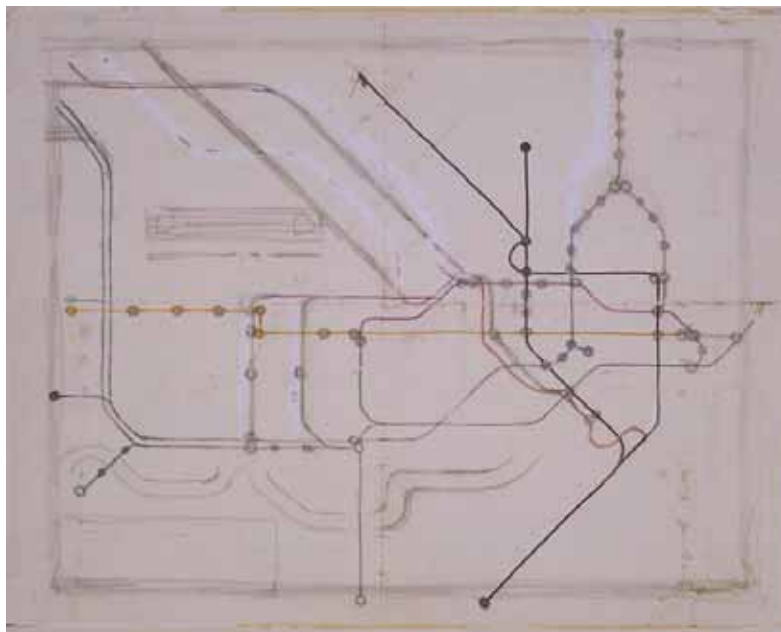


Figure 3. Sketch of the London Underground map, 1931 ( London Passenger Transport Board).

However, the term 'internationalism' applies more to trade and manufacture than to architecture and transport planning. For example, today only few British firms can exist by selling just to the home market. And since goods have to be marketed internationally, even globally, this has led to the emergence of enormous multinational British companies whose goods are made in several countries and whose loyalty is not to any one nation. This is why it has been commonplace

to refer to the national character of products in terms of percentages (i.e. 75 per cent British).<sup>(11)</sup> But the question is what percentage has to be indigenous before it can be considered as belonging to that nation?

The concept of ‘internationalism’ seems to replace any trace of nationalism in design especially after the Second World War as it promotes the values of increasing homogeneity and standardization in this field of industry. For instance, people can now easily enjoy the same makes of cars, jeans, computers, mobile phones or TV programmes virtually all over the world as the commodities of one country look much the same as those of another. Or many national airline companies of one country tend to purchase their airplane fleet from one or more others. In this case the concept of national identity is exclusively communicated by the uniforms of the crew, the livery of the aircraft or even the national flag or other symbols of the country. However, many companies are now aware of the dangers of the standardization and homogenizing trend, and are seriously trying to give again their products a distinctive national character through a series of new attacking advertising and design methods. In this case we understand how cleverly the basic ideological construct of nation can be used as the initiative of a marketing strategy.

The fact that many British-born designers, trained in Britain’s high quality art and design schools and colleges, do not apply their professional skills in their country but work in many cases in different countries, makes ‘internationalism’ in design work against nationalism, as it promotes globally the general diffusion of styles and ideas. Most of these designers who find employment in America or France, for example, presumably contribute consciously to the ‘Americanness’ or the ‘Frenchness’ of the American or French products, in spite of their British cultural or educational background.



Figure 4. Poster advertising the international character of modern design.

Design historians are responsible of selecting, contextualizing, evaluating and interpreting recorded items of information surviving from the past and they also have to be able to distinguish the truth and the objectivity through this significant process, by pointing out the plain objective facts (case studies).<sup>(12)</sup>

However, according to the above, we can understand that there can be several problems arising from this specific approach in history-writing. The nationalistic element makes history-writing pretty difficult because it acquires a distinctive form of subjectivity which is rather hard to eliminate. We are referring to the design historians' point of view, who, most of the time, are unable to deny the strong nationalistic feelings they are fatally possessed by and consequently can not see through a clear perspective the history-writing especially in the case it refers to their own home country design. There are many cases in the British design history-writing where the empathy, the fanaticism and generally the negative connotations of nationalism are more than apparent, suggesting not only an extreme ideology, but also a rather invalid source of information. A good example which may enhance the above statement is the book of Nikolaus Pevsner *The Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, in which the author seems to focus mainly on the importance of the role of designers, rather than the ways in which design shapes ideas about the world into the form of physical objects. In this case designers (especially the British) are presented as the unique national heroes of producing civilization through their work, representing the nationalistic element in the design history-writing.

Another book of the same author with a nationalistic approach is *The Englishness of English Art*, in which art and design seem to be provocatively degraded into only the essential factors of the national culture and the physical environment of England.

On the other hand, the nationalistic way of thinking has a lot to offer in the design history-writing, as long as it is used properly. One can easily identify some strongly positive qualities in the concept of nationalism – such as the 'national pride' and the 'national interest' – which come in sharp contrast with what is mentioned in the above paragraph. These qualities are wholly laudable since they are meant to refer to clearly legitimate concerns which do not conflict inevitably with the nationalism of other nations and do not underestimate their own success and values. The sense of equality between the nationalisms of two different nations is very strong in this case as even their competing claims can be settled through peaceful compromise; this is why it constitutes the principal idea in the general history-writing.

In the series of positive aspects of nationalism one could add the concept of 'patriotism' which can often replace the 'imperialistic' flair of nationalism. Patriotism, unlike nationalism, is not characterized by the aggressiveness of political force and does not involve disrespect towards other people (racism, xenophobia), which may lead design historians to wrong and unfair assumptions in the history-writing of a particular nation.

However, as far as the world design history-writing is concerned, the term of 'internationalism' can now be considered as the basic prism through which many contemporary design historians understand and evaluate the historical traces of new design trends around the globe, without functioning subjectively.



ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

(Endnotes)

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