

## NATION AND NATIONALISM: A LOOK FROM THE MODERNIZING CURRENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL STATE IN PANAMÁ

### *NACIÓN Y NACIONALISMO: UNA MIRADA DESDE LA CORRIENTE MODERNIZADORA EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL ESTADO NACIONAL EN PANAMÁ*

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to analyze part of the historiographic production on the nation and nationalism from the perspective of the modernizing current, in this case represented in the works of Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. This modernizing approach and its contributions from the methodological point of view, allows an approach to the construction of the national State in Panama during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a process called “historical project of national construction”. This project materialized with the coming to power of Belisario Porras, which meant the beginning of a profound organic transformation of the State, constituting an effective change of the historical project towards a modern national State.

**Keywords:** Panamá, Nation, Nationalism, National State.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar parte de la producción historiográfica sobre de la nación y el nacionalismo desde la perspectiva de la corriente modernizadora, en este caso representada en las obras de Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson y Eric Hobsbawm. Este enfoque modernizador y sus aportes desde el punto metodológico, permite hacer una aproximación a la construcción del Estado nacional en Panamá durante el siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX, un proceso que se denomina “proyecto histórico de construcción nacional”. Este proyecto se materializa con la llegada al poder de Belisario Porras, lo que significó el inicio de una profunda transformación orgánica del Estado, constituyendo un cambio efectivo de proyecto histórico hacia un Estado nacional moderno.

**Palabras clave:** Panamá, Nación, Nacionalismo, Estado Nacional.

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of nationalism is a phenomenon with complex characteristics, and those who have been introduced to the subject of nationalism recognize this, which opens a space for new approaches to the subject. This article will attempt to account for the theses of various contemporary authors linked to the modernist current who have made significant contributions to the discussion, and which allow us to address the causes that determine the emergence of nationalist ideas and the subsequent creation of a sovereign national state.

At the beginning of the French Revolution and its repercussions in the intellectual world at the end of the 19th century, two visions of nationalism emerged, one German, linked to the ethnic conception, and the other French, linked to the civic conception, both known as cultural nationalism and political nationalism (Rojas, 2004).

Undoubtedly, due to the attractiveness of the French phenomenon, it was cultural nationalism that gathered more followers, placing it as the oldest of the theories linked to nation-building experiences of the Western type. The political nationalism that is later, and which is linked to the German experience, is considered later and is related to nation-building experiences of the Eastern type (Brubaker, 1992).

According to the bibliographic review carried out, it has been perceived that there is a marked Eurocentric tendency among specialists on the origin of nationalism. For some authors such as Kedourie (1985) nationalism is the result of the Enlightenment and the role of Immanuel Kant, while for Gellner (2001) and Hobsbawm (1997) it originates as a result of capitalism and industrialization. Only one author, Anderson (1993), dissociates himself from this Eurocentric origin of nationalism. However, he agrees with the two previous authors on the modern phenomenon of nationalism.

Seen from this perspective, the modernizing paradigm is located in the social change produced by material transformations, whether economic or technological. Nationalism, in turn, is presented as a feeling that arises with modernization, and by which a given community recognizes itself as part of the same nation. This will help to understand how this

process experienced by Panama in the construction of its nation was developing until it materialized at the beginning of the 20th century.

In short, what happens in Panama, from a historical moment subjected to unfavorable economic conditions, particularly with its adhesion to Gran Colombia, gives rise to a story that is configured as a kind of justifying symbiosis from historical and mythical perspectives of its transitional character, which will gradually begin to account for the formation of nationalist sentiment.

This story is reflected in the discourse of the commercial elite, already in the thirties of the nineteenth century, and later, at the beginning of the second half of the same century, it will be strengthened with the constitution of the Federal State. Thus, in this way, the formation of a consciousness and later a nationalist movement will go through several stages until a national consciousness is formed, with ups and downs. It is for this reason that the different historical processes that Panama experienced during the 19th century led it to become a more modern society, which at the beginning of the 20th century, promoted an ascending national sentiment, which after a long and difficult process, allowed it to achieve its longed-for autonomy in the attainment of a sovereign national state at the beginning of the 20th century.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the development of this article is qualitative in nature, using techniques of interpretation and analysis of secondary sources of the main representatives of the modernist current of studies on nation and nationalism.

The qualitative analysis of the works of the authors of the modernist current had the objective of knowing the fundamental variables of the conformation of the nation, such as industrialization, cultural homogenization, national identity, and the origin of the nation. To identify these variables, a research technique was applied based on the documentary observation of texts, developing bibliographic cards in coordination with the active and analytical reading of the different sources. This made it possible to deduce a relationship of

ideas among the authors and to understand the process of national construction in Panama at the beginning of the 20th century.

## DEVELOPMENT

### Modernist currents on nationalism and the nation

Benedict Anderson in his work “*Comunidades Imaginadas. Reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo*”, ...like nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind”, and defines the nation as ‘a political community imagined as inherently limited and sovereign’ (Anderson, 1993, p. 21). He further adds: “It is imagined because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their compatriots, will never see or even hear of them, but in the mind of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 23). It is limited in that “it has finite, though elastic, boundaries beyond which lie other nations” (p. 25). And its sovereignty is based on the time when the Enlightenment and the Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the hierarchical dynastic kingdom, and this sovereignty or freedom was guaranteed in the sovereign state” (Anderson, 1993, p. 25).

This author concludes, therefore, that the cultural roots of nationalism.... “must be understood as aligning it, not with conscious political ideologies, but with larger cultural systems that preceded it, from which it arose by opposition” (Anderson, 1993, p. 30).

Thus, Anderson sees nations as “imagined communities” products of the cognitive modernization produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Anderson, 1993), while Hobsbawm (1997) sees nations as invented traditions or cultural artifacts manufactured by elites, or inventions of tradition. Anderson is one of the few authors who refers to Latin America, pointing out that the construction of the nation in this region has an original character due to particular historical circumstances, due to the great extension of the territory and its geographical diversity that made communications difficult, which ultimately allowed these units to develop important degrees of autonomy (Anderson, 1993, p. 84).

On the other hand, Eric Hobsbawm, representative of the modernist current of nationhood, considers that nationalism is an inevitable consequence of capitalism and industrialization

(Hobsbawm, 1997). Although this author agrees with Gellner that nations are mostly modern, his difference lies in the fact that he considers nations as tools of manipulative elites or as ideological masks that hide interests. In contrast, Gellner (2001) sees them as instruments of elites, but also as authentic expressions of identity.

Hobsbawm (1997) agrees with Gellner that the nation belongs “exclusively to a specific and historically recent period” (p. 18), but emphasizes that “for purposes of analysis, nationalism precedes nations and argues that nations do not build states and nationalisms, but the other way around” (p. 18).

Thus, a review of the literature on national studies and nationalism, especially in recent decades, can provide a broad overview of its progress and prospects. This could enrich the current discussion and summarize this modernizing current as follows:

- 1.-Nations are modern.
- 2.-Nations are the product of modernity.
- 3.-Nations are not a product of long duration (history).
- 4.-Nationalism is part of modernity or more precisely of the processes of modernization.

Nations and nationalism are social constructions and cultural creations of modernity (Gellner, 2001).

It is important to take this opportunity to mention another current that emerges in response to modernism: the primordia list or perennials current, whose best-known representative is Adrian Hastings (2000). This perspective approaches the subject in a diametrically opposite way, relating the nation more to a model of permanence of ethnicities, as well as to ideological diffusion or construction. Hastings' work is based on Hobsbawm's 1985 lectures, which later gave rise to his book *Naciones y nacionalismos*.

In short, Hastings' work is a response to other specialists on the subject, given that Hobsbawm's lectures were based on the studies of Gellner and Anderson. Hastings' proposal is presented as fairly straightforward, since it puts forward two angles that seem to differentiate it from previous authors. First, he considers the nation as a community more

conscious of its particular identity and culture, which makes it different from others (Hastings, 2000, p. 14). In addition, he introduces a differentiating element: the role of religion. Hastings argues that the Bible provided, at least for the Christian world, the original model of nationhood. Therefore, he states that “...without religion and its Christian interpretation and application, it is arguable that nations and nationalism, as we know them, could have existed.” The only thing to criticize in his view is that in his book he fails to establish convincingly the perennial relationship between religion and nation.

In recent decades, new perspectives have emerged that seek to dissociate themselves from questions about the historical origin of nations and the constitution of nationalist discourses. In general, these approaches seek to broaden the horizon of the national phenomenon.

In this context, we can identify a postcolonial current based on subaltern studies, whose main representative is Partha Chatterjee (2008). This author dissociates himself from Western approaches to understand the phenomenon of the education of nations, arguing that Western time differs from Eastern time. According to Chatterjee, Western time is based on a capitalist logic, while in the colonies time is more heterogeneous and fragmented.

In Chile, other contributions in this line are beginning to appear, such as those of the National History Prize winner, Dr. Julio Pinto, who together with Verónica Valdivia, has published a series of works from the perspective of subaltern studies, which they call “processes of social construction of the State” (Pinto and Valdivia, 2009; Pinto, 2010, 2016). His research has been an interesting contribution to the debate on the construction of nation-states in Chile, Peru, and Argentina, distancing himself from classical and modern studies on nation-building, as historian Consuelo Figueroa points out:

...is a contribution of enormous magnitude regarding the period in question and the ways of thinking about national history(s), but it also opens up valuable possibilities to continue investigating and broadening the discussion toward new questions and perspectives on the processes of national construction. For instance, to inquire not only about the reception of the policies emanating from the elite groups by the popular sectors but also about the eventual projects arising from below. (Figueroa, 2011, p. 234)

Similarly, there is a proposal that incorporates elements of postmodernity, focusing on linguistics and discourse theory, as Calhoun (2007) and Özkirimli (2010) do. In this sense, Calhoun, in his book *Nationalism*, develops the idea that discursive formation in modernity structures various movements, including nationalism. He does not only focus on discursive formation, but also delves into other dimensions, such as social solidarity and collective identity. However, his view distances himself from the construction of nationalist discourse, because he places it at lower levels and, sometimes, in opposition to institutionalized forms such as the state (Calhoun, 2007).

### **The construction of the national state in Panama**

For a long time and up to the present, Panamanian historiography has been dominated by the idea that “the fundamental basis that has driven the structuring of nationality has been, and continues to be, a myth, the geographical myth” (Soler, 1971, p. 100). For this reason, Soler states that since pre-Hispanic times, the geographical position of the Panamanian Isthmus constituted, to a great extent, an inescapable framework of its history. Proof of this is that the two great pre-Columbian civilizing centers, Inca Peru and Nahuatl-Aztec Mexico, used this geographical position as a transit route.

Later, and as a result of its discovery in 1501, this transitional function was affirmed from the 1540s onwards, and only in the mid-19th century did it begin to decline with the closing of Portobelo. In effect, colonial transitism had political effects, since the Crown had to recognize Panama's specificity by not subjecting its territory to the administration of the Captaincy General of Guatemala and by creating for the isthmus a political institutionality directly dependent on the metropolis (governors and audiences). However, the transitional character not only had its effects on the economy and politics. The predominance of mercantile activity left its mark on culture, which was in obvious contrast to the rest of the Hispanic colonial world (Soler, 1971). This idea of the geographical myth as a confirmation of their personality as a people can be seen in Soler's work and Muñoz (2022).

In particular, what interests us on this occasion is to relate this geographical myth from the perspective of modernization, specifically in the construction of the national State. For this

reason, this paradigm of modernization is examined in depth in economic and technical terms. In this regard, Jaffrelot points out:

Modernización» and «nacionalismo» the first term refers to social change induced by material transformations (economic, technological), and the second designates not an ideology, but rather a state of mind, a new feeling linked to modernization by which a given population recognizes itself as belonging to a given population «nación (Jaffrelot, as cited in Delannoi and Taguieff, 1993, p. 205).

As can be seen, this paradigm is related to three other variables in the formation of the nation: economy, territory, and culture. Concerning this last variable, it coincides with the perspectives of Anderson and Gellner, who argue that the cohesion of culture is required from the development of communication networks. These networks are generated as a result of territorial integration, driven by the process of urbanization, the development of education, and the expansion of educational offerings, as well as the development of the press and the arrival of a large migrant population. However, this process of cultural homogenization is not free of conflicts, which, in turn, gradually contributes to the generation of a national consciousness (Delannoi and Taguieff, 1993).

From this perspective and placing itself in the modernizing paradigm that emphasizes social change brought about by material transformations, whether economic or technological, nationalism is presented as a sentiment that emerges with modernization. Through this sentiment, a given community recognizes itself as part of the same nation.

Undoubtedly, all these perspectives will help to understand how Panama experienced its nation-building process until it materialized in the early twentieth century. To explain this, we turn to Gellner (2001), whose work is most closely aligned with this modernizing paradigm, pointing out that:

Our definition of nationalism is not only conditional on a prior and assumed definition of the state: it also seems that nationalism only emerges in situations where the existence of the state is already taken for granted. A necessary, though

by no means sufficient, condition for nationalism is the existence of politically centralized units and of a political-moral environment in which such units are taken for granted and considered the norm (p. 17).

Nationalism, therefore, represents the transformation from one society to another. Its emergence allows the creation of a common language and a set of shared meanings, resulting in greater fluidity and more efficient use of the resources available in any society. The emergence of an industrial society promotes cultural homogenization, which in turn generates a national consciousness. In this regard, Gellner (2001) states that: “It is not that nationalism imposes homogeneity, as Elie Kedourie says, but that an objective and inevitable obligation imposes a homogeneity that ends up surfacing in the form of nationalism” (pp. 59-60).

As noted above, the seeds of the nationalist movement are inscribed in the role that Panama played as a place of transit, since the colonial period, considered a geostrategic space for Spain. Later, in the 19th century, this transition would be consolidated with the construction of the interoceanic railroad and, subsequently, with the building of the Panama Canal.

What happens in Panama is that, from a historical moment characterized by unfavorable economic conditions due to its voluntary adhesion to Gran Colombia, a story was gradually installed that functions as a kind of justifying symbiosis, both from the historical and mythical point of view, of the transitional character of the Isthmus. This story will begin, little by little, to account for the formation of a nationalist sentiment.

This narrative was reflected in the discourse of the commercial elite as early as the thirties of the nineteenth century and would later take hold with the constitution of the Federal State. Thus, the formation of a consciousness, and later a nationalist movement, would go through several stages with ups and downs, until a national consciousness was consolidated. Jaffrelot and Gellner address the conflict present in the process of cultural homogenization.

In this way, the structuring of a national consciousness made it possible to achieve its goal of full autonomy until the formation of its national state. For this reason, it is argued that since the 1930s, and in particular with the construction of the railroad and all its modernizing

load, the first expressions of autonomy in the formation of a national consciousness were promoted.

According to Gellner, the actors in charge of defining this national consciousness, of elaborating and promoting the cultural themes that would legitimize political and economic demands, should be intellectuals and the proletariat, thus creating an effective nationalist movement. In the Panamanian case, this view agrees with the approach to the construction of national consciousness, since it is the intelligentsia that promotes this feeling, at least in the first stage, which corresponds to the nineteenth century (Muñoz, 2022). Later, as a result of the arrival of a large wave of immigrants during the construction of the Canal, conditions were created for the formation of a proletariat that echoed these proposals, thus contributing to the formation of a nationalist movement. However, this did not occur until the early years of the twentieth century, with the modernizing work of Belisario Porras.

From this perspective, nationalism in Panama is linked to the dimension of modernization. However, this modernization was slower due to the heterogeneity of the actors involved and the weight of certain sectors that were satisfied with the limited effects of a merely commercial activation of the geographic myth. Therefore, if Gellner's model and some considerations made by other authors are applied to this analysis, it would help to better understand how the modernization dimension manifested itself in Panama.

Mouzelis (2000) argues that Gellner establishes too close a link between industrialization and nationalism, when in fact the two phenomena are not always closely linked. In other words, Gellner's proposal is limited more than anything else to Western Europe, therefore, for the case of Panama, this would automatically be left out. This is why the modification proposed by Mouzelis is accepted, in the sense of retaining the idea of a centralized State and a market, as it is present in Gellner's theory, which is consistent with the situation of Panama in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it would be necessary to replace the concept of industrialization with that of modernization.

In this context, modernization is understood as the type of social organizations that became institutionalized after the English Industrial Revolution and the French political revolution, i.e., this implies the destruction of localism and the creation, through unprecedented social

mobilization, of broad areas in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. However, in the case of Panama, modernity arrived mainly through predominantly mercantile channels (Mouzelis, 2000, p. 215).

On the other hand, O'Leary (2000) criticizes Gellner's functionalist position, arguing that Gellner states that events and processes occur totally or mostly beyond the understanding of human agents. O'Leary proposes to replace this functionalist explanation with a 'filter' one, which would act as follows:

Modernizing elites believe that nationalism is essential to modernization precisely because it removes barriers to successful modernization. Nation-building nationalists recognize the beneficial consequences of nationalism, and this fact helps to explain its political diffusion.

If we look at the specific case of Panama, the commercial elites' discourse manifests a need for modernization associated with the idea of nationhood. This complementarity between modernization and nation emerged very early in the early 19th century.

The use of this filter makes it possible to determine the characteristics of the modernizing proposals of the political elites driving the Panamanian nationalist movement, as well as to understand how these proposals resonated with other dominant sectors that resisted this adventure of autonomy. For this reason, Gellner identifies the State as the objective condition that makes nationalism possible, stating that:

...nationalism only emerges in situations where the existence of the state is already taken for granted. A necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition of nationalism is the existence of politically centralized units and not of a political-moral environment in which such units are taken for granted and considered the norm (Gellner, 2001, p. 17).

According to Gellner, three variables explain the formation of nationalism and the nation. These variables are the economic variable, which refers to an industrial or modern society; the cultural variable, which implies the need for cultural homogenization or a developed culture; and finally, the political variable, which corresponds to the need for a modern state. The first variable responds to a specific historical condition, characterized by a series of

social circumstances arising from a type of social organization called industrial society, or in this case, modern society. On the other hand, the second variable indicates that this industrial or modern society imposes an order that requires its social units to be large and culturally homogeneous.

In the Panamanian case, this first variable was constituted by the arrival of a large contingent of foreign labor during the construction of the railroad. Subsequently, the cultural variable was forged with the construction of the Panama Canal. Both variables influenced the formation of a national proletariat that developed its organizations. This process took place in the context of a modernizing phase, with an emphasis on an industrial base that became evident during the governments of Belisario Porras, between 1912 and 1924.

The third variable points out that, in order for the process of monoculturalist identification of a given community to take place, a State is necessary. That is to say, the maintenance of this type of culture, inevitably developed, requires the protection of a State, of an agent - or rather set of agents - that maintains the centralized order and that can gather and dispense the necessary resources, both to sustain a developed culture and to ensure its diffusion to the entire population. Only then, when that nation/culture becomes the natural social unit, can it not survive normally without its political shell: the State (Gellner, 2001, p. 18).

All these variables were present in the historical project of Belisario Porras, since his main objective was the construction of a modern State, whose primary task was to dismantle the old oligarchic State, inherited from Colombia, through the expansion of its social support base and the strengthening of the political and economic participation of formerly marginalized sectors of Panamanian society. In this way, the formation of the nation was not only the task of a group of people who managed to materialize a historical dream of national construction but of a broader group that through their organizations helped to achieve it. In this particular case in Panama, nationalism did not constitute the nation, but on the contrary, it was the nation and the State that constituted nationalism.

## CONCLUSIONS

Undoubtedly, the modernizing paradigm of the nation, represented by the authors mentioned in this article, made it possible to understand the series of material transformations, whether economic, political, or cultural. In addition, nationalism approaches a feeling that arises with modernization, through which a given community recognizes itself as belonging to the same nation. These premises are fundamental and help to understand how this process that Panama underwent throughout the 19th century was decisive in the construction of its nation until it materialized definitively at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Panama, a process characterized by profound political, social, and economic changes began in 1912, an unprecedented event in the nascent republic. It was not only a cosmetic transformation, but an effective change, expressed in what is called a “historical project of national construction”, understanding this process as a deep structural organization both economic, political/institutional, and cultural, led by a group of liberal representatives headed by the figure of Belisario Porras.

During the period of their governments from 1912-1924, a historical dream of national construction materialized through a series of legal, economic, and social measures that managed to imprint a “National” character on the construction of the modern Panamanian state, which required disarming a whole structure of oligarchic power that dominated the economic and political scene throughout the nineteenth century, a period in which the commercial elite was unable to achieve a true autonomy as a nation since it failed to generate a cohesion that allowed its citizens to identify themselves as Panamanians.

As a final thought, studies on the formation of modern nations must consider the necessary connection between social democratization and state form. With the support of a large majority of its citizens, this connection is one of the most effective ways to consolidate the nation and constitute modern nation-states.

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