

The end of the

The French sociologist Dominique Schnapper has been recognised for her life's work studying the nation state. Looking ahead she is pessimistic about the future health of democracy in Europe

Words by Ziba Norman. Portrait by Sophie Bassouls

Dominique Schnapper is only the second woman, after Mother Teresa, to be awarded the prestigious Balzan Foundation Prize of one million Swiss francs (about £433,000) for her lifetime achievements. During her long and distinguished career as a sociologist she has been best known for her book *Community of Citizens, On the Modern Idea of Nationality*, in which she analysed the construction of the modern nation and its ability to integrate people of different backgrounds.

Even before becoming a Balzan laureate Dominique Schnapper was no stranger to elevated political and cultural circles. Her father, Raymond Aron, was the author of *Opium of the Intellectuals*, an anti-communist diatribe written at the height of the cold war; and she was herself a one time assistant to the left-wing thinker Pierre Bourdieu, author of such books as *Backfire: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. She later moved away from the more radical, left-leaning fringes of sociology.

Schnapper, who turned 68 this year, is an analyst rather than a reformer and a realist rather than a visionary. One of her strongest views is that society needs a political arena in which individuals act as citizens, for the collective good. She also believes that the nation state is endangered, under pressure by the forces of globalisation and the weakening of civic ties inside the state. The new "politics of identity", with its focus very much on the material well-being of the individual and special interest groups rather than society at large is, in Schnapper's view, prejudicing the health of our democracies.

Like most sociologists Schnapper subscribes to the modernist view of the genesis of the nation state; that it is created by arbitrary processes and is not an historical destiny. Her interests lie in the evolution of the modern democratic nation: "I would not like to take sides in this debate on what the nation is or should be... I am interested in how the nations came out and developed democratic traditions over a period of time." Schnapper's reputation suggests that she comes out of the Jacobinic tradition, associated with the formation of the French Republic. It is characterised by a "republican model of citizenship" with its emphasis on active participation in shaping society, and stands in contrast to a so-called liberal model in which the obligations of citizenship are kept to a minimum. The Jacobinic tradition requires that citizenship come first and the assertion of individual identity second. Schnapper is sensitive to the term Jacobinic, believing *Community of Citizens* to have been misinterpreted, with many of her readers either condemning or praising her for being



nationalistic. Her response is an emphatic "certainly not... I wrote about how France integrated as a state... it was the Jacobinic tradition that created France."

Schnapper is ambivalent about the debate over the future development of the EU, recognising its potential but sceptical of its chances of achieving its aims, at least in the short term. How then does she see a unified Europe being created without generating frictions that in themselves cause conflict? Frictions, she tells me, occur within nation states and are solved by "compromise and not violence, and it is essential that the construction of Europe takes into account that national identities do exist. After World War II there were two great reasons for constructing the EU: one was the horror of war itself and the second was the struggle against communist rule in the Soviet Union." So does she think peace in western Europe has made us complacent, with political apathy being the most obvious manifestation

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of this? “Yes, that is it exactly.” And if post-historical Europe, governed by laws and characterised by negotiation between nation states does not inspire people, is it a victim of its own success? And where should we go from here? For Schnapper it is a matter of time: “It took centuries to create nations, so why should we expect to create Europe [as a nation] in such a short while? It will take time, but it is really a question of whether the politicians, academics and the people want to create it... Europe is a very rational ambition, and like all rational ambitions it does not generate much excitement.” It is the organic nature of the process of nation building that is essential, and to which she continually returns in her work. In *La Relation à L'autre*, she says, “Between the nation and the citizen the bond is not logical, but historical.”

Can one have an allegiance to something as abstract as the EU? “For the time being it is completely abstract, the debate is at the national level.” Notwithstanding its oft-highlighted failures, Schnapper stresses the EU’s enormous success: “We don’t praise the EU enough for creating peace because it is so obvious it is hardly noticed.”

On the subject of the furtherance of the European project, arguably the most sophisticated political response to the problems of globalisation yet devised, she is more pessimistic still: “We cannot go on expanding the Union, it cannot work with 25 nations.” (The current EU timetable proposes that 10 new member states join in May 2004.) But then what of the way forward for the nascent institutions of the EU? Can she see a federal system being established in Europe? “A federal system cannot be implemented in Europe for a while. The nation states are too strong, so there must be something absolutely new that does not exist yet.” She suggests that the EU might develop as a market with treaties between nation states, at least in the short term: “I have the feeling that more and more people throughout Europe are on the British side, wanting an economic market rather than a political institution.”

What about our apparent need to assert regional identities? Schnapper replies, “The problem is not whether it is the nation or the sub-nation, what we need is a level where democracy works, where political processes work, where the idea of citizenship is embedded. That level may differ from nation to nation, but there must be a place where people are citizens. For the time being they do not engage at the European level, they have less and less involvement at the national level and there is little activity at the regional level. We must find a place where the political will is acting in a democratic way.”

The nation must be seen to give legitimacy to the state. The decoupling of the rights and privileges of citizens from the duties of citizenship — in particular, rights granted to residents who are not citizens — is just one example of where legitimacy is lost.

What of the dilemma of liberal democracy? Does it carry within it the seeds of its own destruction? For Schnapper, a new form of national identity needs to be found, one which is open and based on universalistic political principles, one in which citizenship is paramount. The citizen should, in her view, be an active participant, but our current system, based increasingly on rights and entitlements, risks becoming a democracy that amounts to little more than the management of resources. She says, “I am sensitive to measures that only serve to benefit particular groups within a society, because they are contrary to the principles of political legitimacy... liberty and equality. I understood the reasons for affirmative action in the US — it was efficient in that case — but believe that in the long run they [acts of positive discrimination] contribute to the disunity of society.”

What would Schnapper’s father, Raymond Aron, have thought of the shape of 21st-century geopolitics? “He was anti-fascist and anti-communist... I have no idea what he would make of the world situation today, because he was a thinker in a world that was divided... I think democracy is adapted to the nature of man, who wants to be free and equal; it is more adapted to my conception of humanity and human beings. But it is based on a kind of rationality; it is not a natural form, and I am more pessimistic than he was. He had more confidence in the tradition of the Enlightenment... Of course I have another historical experience, the experience of what happened after the fall of the [Berlin] Wall. Democracies were kept together by the threat of the dangerous Soviet army.” Without its traditional enemies, democracy is paradoxically more vulnerable, in her view, with complacency and apathy being the greatest threats to our democratic nation states.

As we part, I am left profoundly aware that the great task for the new century may be the democratisation of international institutions and the creation of new forms of citizenship. Schnapper says she would like to see “the emphasis placed at the European level” but remains concerned that “post-national citizenship” underestimates the importance of the nation state, overlooking the tremendous capacity it has to bind people who may have very little in common other than an allegiance to a set of political beliefs. ■

Further Reading

Community of Citizens, On the Modern Idea of Nationality by Dominique Schnapper (TransActions Publishers, USA, 1998)

Citizenship and National Identity by David Miller (Polity Press, 2002)