

## Race and the Nation-State

During the European Middle Ages, most people were not very educated. Learning was restricted mostly to monks and the Church. Two events sparked a new love of learning, however: Ferdinand and Isabella kicking the Moors out of Spain and Mehmet the Conqueror conquering Constantinople. The Muslim learning tradition the Moors left behind and the flow of artists and intellectuals out of the Byzantine Empire and into Italy sparked an intellectual Enlightenment and an artistic Renaissance. The manic desire of scholars in Europe now was to acquire all of human knowledge, and categorize it. This would result in Denis Diderot inventing the encyclopedia. Mehmet's conquest did something else, though, too. It forced Christianized Europe to find a way around his Muslim empire, which led them to head west and discover the Americas. So, at the same time that Europeans became obsessed with categorizing all the living things on earth, they started to discover all sorts of other humans that looked different than they did. What people of the time did not know, though, was that all humans had evolved from the same stock millions of years ago and had migrated from Africa across the rest of the planet. Middle Age Europeans did not know that because those archaeological discoveries had not been made yet. And so during the colonial age, racial theory was formed and molded with the idea that all members of any one race exhibit distinct and inherent characteristics that separated them from other races—when in fact there is always going to be far, far more diversity within any one race than there will be between the whole groups of people of any two races.

There are many problems with the nation-state model: namely, the “nation” part. The “state” part has to do with laws, gov't institutions, flags, etc. But the origin of the word “nation” is “nativus,” meaning “birth.” This is because the term “nation” was used by the Romans to describe the various tribes they encountered while expanding, people who had been living and intermarrying in one “homeland” for generations. As a result, many of the people of these “nations” shared many genetic characteristics like skin color, eye color, and nose shape. So for most of human history, one genetic stock of people would claim a “nation” as their “homeland.” Likewise, the word “race” was a synonym for “nation.” The Italian “razza” means “breed,” or “stock,” and so the concept of “race” was always tied into that of a “nation.” This is why many countries originally had a problem with immigrants. We don't like it when a group of others who don't look like members of our “nation” move here. And America has had a tendency to “racialize” immigrants—we assign certain behaviors or characters to whole “races” of people until they can learn to talk and eat like us. This idea of the nation, however, is completely against the modern concept of the nation-state. Today, the modern nation-state has become committed to ethnic diversity, which goes against the “nation” part. During the colonial age, imperial powers used forced immigration to get rid of their bad elements like convicts and prostitutes. But even though the colonial age is over, some of us still see immigrants as “others” of “bad character” out to dilute the power of our “nation.”