The development of the culture concept took place in the wake of an enormous expansion of knowledge in both social and natural spheres and as part of the attempt to theorize a vast new array of facts about the world and its various inhabitants. It also took place in an age of state formation and contributed to the consolidation of the sovereignty concept. It is therefore unsurprising that the culture concept should come to reflect the exigencies of the political ideas or ideologies surrounding such movements. These included ideas about the other side of sovereignty, that is, the basis of political authority within the state which in turn prompted further thought about the relationship between rulers and ruled and how the latter were to be characterized. While the concept of nation was not an empty one, just waiting to be infused with cultural elements and new ideas about the state and its occupants, it had the flexibility to accommodate the complex of more explicit political and cultural associations that emerged from the seventeenth century onwards in relation to political community. These were to include democratic ideas which awarded a particular political legitimacy and authority to ‘the people’ which in the nationalist formulation came to comprise ‘a people’. And although democratic ideas were not essential for nation-making purposes they played a key role in many cases, as did certain strands of historiography. These ideas took on different nuances in the colonial world where history joined with other professionalized disciplines, including anthropology and archaeology, in constructing accounts of the societies found there. These later found renewed purpose in anti-colonial nationalisms. But the notion that local resistance movements and their intellectual foundations took their cue from European nationalist thought has been challenged by postcolonial writers whose focus on indigenous agency has raised additional issues concerning the
power/knowledge nexus. However, since postcolonial writers tend to focus on the power of European colonizers, the power of national elites in the period since formal independence, and issues of domination and repression in that context, have received far less attention.

Nations and nationalism

There is no widely agreed definition for either the nation or the ideology of nationalism, beyond the fact that the former is a species of collective identity grounded in some notion of culture, while the latter movement involves a political programme demanding recognition, in some formal way, for that identity. What is far from settled in nationalism is the role of the cultural component as distinct from a political component, the balance between ‘subjective’ elements like will and memory and more ‘objective’ ones like territory and language, and the extent to which nationalism is primarily a cultural rather than a political movement. Advocates of particular nationalisms, including some historians, have often supported a primordial approach to the nation to strengthen its political claims, depicting it in terms highlighting robust qualities of longevity, relatedness, constancy and emotional attachment. The national group is defined, and differentiated from other such groups, through an array of factors which usually includes a shared history and common culture (including language and religion, art and artefacts), a stock of rituals and symbols and a repertoire of myths (including myths of origin), all contributing to a common identity. Primordialism regards the tendency to form such groups, and to relate to them with a deep emotional attachment, as ultimately embedded in human nature. From this perspective, the nation is perennial, and its existence in one form or another is essentially constant through time and space. Nations thus defined may be posited as ‘natural’ candidates for political organization – a strategy that fuses culture and nature, rather than opposing them. The primordialist approach resonates with widespread, popular conceptions of the nation and expresses the nationalist assumption ‘that nations are facts of nature that have differentiated humanity into distinctive cultural communities, each of which has its own territorial habitat and capacities for self-government’. The sociobiological version of primordialism links ethnicity directly to biological kinship, thereby reinforcing the claim that ethnic groups or nations are ‘naturally occurring units’. The understanding of ‘nation’ outlined above is almost indistinguishable from ‘ethnic group’. Indeed, a primordialist approach emphasizes certain qualities of ‘nation-ness’ precisely in terms of ethnicity – as