

Nationalism is perhaps the most powerful ideology of the last couple of centuries. We attempt here to distinguish a number of varieties of nationalism – liberal, reactionary and radical. There follows a brief history of nationalism from the pre-Renaissance period to the twentieth century, after which we consider whether nationalism as an ideology serves particular political interests. Then the psychological appeal of nationalism is examined, as is its impact on international politics, and on empires and multi-national states. Finally, we offer a critique of nationalism and some reflections on its possible future.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Is nationalism anything more than extreme patriotism?
- How would you define a 'nation'?
- Is nationalism an ideology of the left or the right?
- To what extent is the nation a 'natural' social organisation and to what extent an artificial construct?
- Is the principle of 'national self-determination' still a viable one? Was it ever a viable political principle in international affairs?
- Why does nationalism still seem to be a powerful influence in the twenty-first century?
- What is the future of 'identity politics' and 'regional nationalism' in a 'globalised' world?

Nationalism has two fatal charms for its devotees: it presupposes local self-sufficiency, which is a pleasant and desirable condition, and it suggests, very subtly, one's belonging to a place which is definable and familiar, as against a place which is strange and remote. (E. B. White, 'Intimations', *One Man's Meat*, 1944)

Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political unit and the national unit should be congruent . . . Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind. (Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1983)

Nationalism has proved to be one of the most powerful of all political ideologies over the last two centuries and seems likely to remain a potent force well into the present century. Often presented as an ancient, even primal, political ideology, nationalism in the modern sense of the word is arguably a creation of the nineteenth century. As the word itself suggests, it is often seen as somehow 'natural' for people to be members of a readily identifiable 'nation' and to have deep emotional ties to it. In fact, nationalism is much more complex.

It is certainly possible to trace a sense of belonging to a particular group of people, beyond family, clan or tribe, to classical times. By the Middle Ages love of country, 'patriotism', was widespread in Europe. Nationalism, however, goes beyond patriotism. It is, for example, perfectly possible to be a Welsh patriot and cheer one's rugby team without being a nationalist. Nationalism has political implications; patriotism does not necessarily do so. A nation, in nationalist theory, requires some form of political expression, with appropriate institutions. This may involve full independence or devolved political institutions within a larger state.

Nationalism as an ideology

As an ideology, nationalism involves creating a 'world view' – a *Weltanschauung* – a set of coherent ideas and values that gives meaning to the past for a social group, explains the present, and offers a programme for possible future action. Nationalism is the least intellectual of the major ideologies while being the most irrational and emotional, tapping into deep passions.

Uniquely among ideologies, nationalism has no theory of human nature. It may, of course, have theories as to the particular nature of specific peoples, such as the unique 'soul' of the Russians or the commitment to fairness of the English. However, there is a sense in which nationalism entails a view of human nature. Nationalists claim that each nation is a 'natural' unit, and the bonds that bind a nation are both natural and good. For the individual, therefore, the welfare of the nation is a supreme good.

Nationalism places loyalty to the nation above all other forms of political and *social* loyalties. One may place one's moral or religious beliefs above national identity, but nationalism assumes that these must give way to loyalty to the nation if there is a clash. Nationalism not only makes the nation the focus of political loyalty but also insists that the nation is the only proper basis for the organisation of any political activity. Thus the nation, made up of all the people who belong to it, can legitimately claim property, lives and any other sacrifice from its members to ensure the survival of the collective.

One of the big questions of nationalism is just how 'natural' a nation is. It can be plausibly argued that nations are 'invented' either by the literary endeavours of poets or the processes of state power. Nationalism nevertheless assumes that the 'people' or 'the nation' is an entity with sovereign rights and a fundamental unity of 'blood', 'culture' or 'citizenship'. We shall now consider these elements of nationalism: sovereignty of the people; Ethnic nationalism and Civic nationalism.

Sovereignty of the people

From this viewpoint the 'nation' is essentially the same as the 'people', involving the idea that people are bound together into a group united in common patriotic identification with the nation. Popular sovereignty is a very important basis for loyalty to the state or for struggles by a subordinate nation to create a state. Conservatives regard popular sovereignty as an appeal to national unity over class, religion and other social divisions. Radicals use it to rally popular support against an unjust government. Appeals to popular sovereignty can be seen in revolutionary documents such as the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789).

Ethnic nationalism and Civic nationalism

Ethnic nationalism identifies a close connection between national members linked by race, language or other cultural attributes that persist over centuries. One is a member of the nation by birth and bloodline, by genetics, and bears an identity that cannot be sloughed off by becoming a citizen of another nation or acquired by choice and filling in an application form. So, for example, ethnic Germans, who for centuries had lived in what had become Russia, could apply to rejoin their nation and return to German soil. They were, until recently, able to stake a better claim to German citizenship than Turkish 'guest workers' and even the latter's German-born descendants.

Civic nationalism is the basis of American, French or British nationalism. It identifies the common historical ties that exist between the people in the nation, ties that can easily be extended to other people through citizenship and the loyalties and obligations associated with acquiring that citizenship.

There is no ethnic limitation on who can potentially be a member of the nation. However, one should not forget the difficulty of attaining this form of nationalism in practice. Existing members of the nation may have very strong objections to large-scale additions of people to the nation by acquisition of citizenship.

Nationalism is, therefore, not a straightforward ideology. It can wear many faces, display many forms. It can be conservative, fascist, liberal, socialist, even Marxist. All political ideologies have used nationalism for their ends. Even anarchism, probably the least influenced by nationalism, is affected by national identity and the national experience of anarchists, bringing different theoretical contributions to the movement. Nevertheless, nationalism is characterised at a fundamental level by the belief, demand even, that each nation should be governed by its own sovereign state.

We can usefully sub-divide nationalism into three categories:

- liberal nationalism;
- reactionary nationalism;
- radical nationalism.

Liberal nationalism

According to this school of thought, mankind is naturally divided into nations, all of which have certain territorial limits to which they are equally entitled. Each should be sovereign, self-governing, with its own political institutions. National rights are analogous to human rights and are also universal. This form of nationalism sits easily with the more internationalist, pacifist and idealist elements within liberalism. A world of sovereign nations would respect each other's national rights and co-operate readily within international institutions. Certainly this was the hope of liberal nationalists such as Giuseppe Mazzini in Italy. The revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848 were greatly influenced by liberals and were almost always successfully crushed by the threatened states.

It is taken for granted that such nationalism would involve respect for minority rights, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic. This 'acceptable' form of nationalism was popular among liberals and some socialists during the early nineteenth century. After the First World War it was resurrected in the institution of the League of Nations, founded on the principles of national self-determination and collective security. After the Second World War this form of nationalism was embodied in the United Nations and other liberal international bodies set up to regulate human rights and the free-trade international economy.

Liberal nationalists under-estimate the problems of identifying natural national units in terms of population, geography and economic viability. They

disregard nationalism's potential for evil, and over-estimate its positive elements. Nevertheless, liberal nationalism was and still remains a very strong element in many modern nationalist movements.

Reactionary nationalism

With the failure of the liberal-nationalist revolutions of 1848, nationalism in many European countries became increasingly associated with the conservative and reactionary forces involved in creating and preserving the nation and its institutions, which were threatened by revolution and socialism. Nationalism became a means by which the national identity of some citizens was crushed or suppressed to ensure the unity of the larger nation. This was especially the case in the sprawling multi-national Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, both struggling with rising nationalism and both trying to assert imperial nationalism and unity over the demands for greater self-government and independence of restless subservient nations.

After 1870 with the setting up of the Third French Republic and the unification of Germany, reactionary nationalism became ever more powerful in Europe. It was linked with an organic national identity as expressed in religion, social order, traditional hierarchies, language, culture and customs. Overseas, it involved **imperialism**, racism, and claims of the right to rule over 'inferior' nations, along with vigorous political and military competition with other nations. Such nationalism repudiated socialism and liberalism and instilled itself as an ideological alternative in the minds of the newly enfranchised masses.

By the twentieth century, this model of nationalism became allied with conservatism, so closely that the radical and socialist left worked hard in most Western democracies to distance themselves from the nationalism of their political opponents and, hence, from nationalism altogether. Reactionary nationalism may stress patriotism and the unique nature of the nation but it is not necessarily imperialistic, even if it was associated with late nineteenth-century 'popular imperialism'. It is often indifferent to events outside the nation, so long as the rest of the world leaves it alone.

imperialism

The process of creating an empire. An empire is a type of political system where one nation by dint of its superior power dominates and controls other nations. In Lenin's view, imperialism was a phase of capitalist expansion involving the subjugation and economic exploitation of the less developed part of the world.

Radical nationalism

This emerged after the First World War, though arguably it could be traced back to the French revolutionaries. Radical nationalism was (and is) connected with a desire to change the domestic and/or international order, an order that seemed to need changing in favour of one's own nation. It took two

major forms. One form of radical nationalism was an essentially rightist form of politics; the other was the mainstay of anti-colonialism.

Radical-right nationalism despised the old order, the privileged classes and out-dated institutions, all of which were condemned as having betrayed the nation. Often it required energetic and dramatic social, economic and political reform, intended to renew the nation. It sought to offer the working classes an alternative to the internationalism of communism and socialism after the Russian Revolution.

Defeat in war was a stimulus to this form of nationalism in Germany and Turkey, but it also emerged in Italy and France, where formal victory had been purchased at a terrible cost. This form of radical nationalism tended to be intolerant of minorities that were not regarded as authentically part of the nation, and vociferous in its claims against neighbouring states. In its extreme form it sets the superiority of the nation above other nations and may be used to justify wars of territorial aggrandisement. Such nationalism merges easily into fascism.

Radical nationalism may, however, take an almost entirely opposite path: anti-colonial struggle against reactionary or imperialist radical nationalism. In this form it uses the values of nationalism to make a case for independence from a political structure that is seen as oppressive of the members of the nation. It appeals to the doctrine of national self-determination and the logic of national independence. Nationalism played a significant role in the ending of the European empires during the decades after the Second World War.

In the same period this form of nationalism often contained a strong socialist element as it was linked to the communal values of indigenous societies as well as the overthrow of the colonial ruling class. After independence, this form of nationalism involved resistance to Western economic, cultural and political domination (condemned as 'neo-colonialism') and led many developing world states to nationalise the assets of foreign-owned multi-national corporations based in their countries.

Nationalism: the history of an ideology

One might assert that modern history has been directed by the rise, development and spread of nationalism. We can identify a number of stages in the development of nationalism:

- proto-nationalism;
- early modern nationalism;
- nationalism in the age of revolutions;
- twentieth-century nationalism;
- post-**Cold War** nationalism.

Cold War

A term which refers to the struggle between the West and the Soviet Union from just after the Second World War to the late 1980s. It was a conflict that stopped short of a full-scale 'hot war'.

Proto-nationalism

Before the European Renaissance there was among Europeans some sense of national differences and identification with kings, princes, languages and cultures. The context was the universalist claim of loyalty to **Christendom** in the shape of the Pope and the **Holy Roman Emperor** in the face of the threat from the Muslim world.

Christendom

Essentially an alternative name for Europe during the Middle Ages which described the domination of Christianity and its claim to create a degree of unity among Christians in the face of the threat from Islam.

Early modern nationalism

The break-up of Christendom during the later Renaissance helped to create a sense of national identity. Shared language, increasingly explicit 'national' culture, 'national' religion, constant wars all helped strengthen the sense of national differences, national identity and support for strong centralised states that increasingly had the ability to create national loyalty among their populations.

Holy Roman Empire

The Western part of the Roman Empire was revived by Charlemagne in 800 when he was crowned Emperor. The title Holy Roman Empire was established in 962 and endured until 1806 when it was abolished by Napoleon who dismissed it as neither Holy, Roman nor an Empire.

Nationalism in the age of revolutions

Nationalism, however ancient its roots, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Agricultural and industrial revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries broke down many older, lesser loyalties without initially replacing them with new ones. The nation would become that replacement.

The American Revolution and, especially, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars played a vital role in the development of modern nationalism. Before these conflicts an individual's loyalty was essentially to another individual (the monarch, for example). Most aspects of Europe's *ancien régime* were overthrown during the French Wars and a sense of nationhood was stimulated in most nations across Europe, from Spain and Portugal to Russia. The highest form of political loyalty shifted from the monarch to the 'nation', or the 'people', from an individual who embodied the nation to a group. Indeed, so powerful did the concept become that most nationalists argue that the nation is a *natural* social organisation.

Although nationalism today is often related to the political right, during the nineteenth century it was usually a liberal and revolutionary ideology, certainly up to the revolutions of 1848. It played a vital role in the unification of Italy (1861) and Germany (1871), and the struggles for national liberation of oppressed nations such as the Irish, the Czechs and the Poles throughout the nineteenth century.

In some ways the concept of the nation became more tangible as people identified the nation as consisting of their fellow citizens, rather than some remote monarch. During the nineteenth century centralised and powerful states increasingly legitimised their actions by claiming to represent 'the people'. Nationalism legitimised a state's actions and was often used as a means to suppress opposition to the state's policies and rule – hence the development of the vague but powerful concept of the 'national interest'.

By the end of the century nationalism had spread with European power across the globe. Embryonic nationalist movements grew up within the colonial empires to press for greater self-government and, eventually, independence.

Twentieth-century nationalism

The twentieth century was an era of total warfare that strengthened nationalism at the time. It was also a century during which the viability, and value, of nations as political units was questioned with increasing urgency. Nationalism as a valid ideology for human affairs was also challenged. Twentieth-century wars were too destructive, the loss of life too great for nationalism to be free of blame for its contribution to the horrors. A considerable degree of hostility to nationalism grew during the century, especially after the world wars.

There were attempts to distinguish between imperialist nationalism ('bad') and anti-colonialist nationalism ('good'). After the Second World War national liberation movements were boosted by the nature of the struggle against fascist nationalism. The British, for instance, could hardly fight a war against imperialism and racism and then go back to governing an empire built on imperialism and racism. Whatever the form it took, nationalism remained widely perceived as a dangerous and destructive force, open to little rational explanation and unleashing extreme violence and intolerance into politics.

Nationalism was used as a reinforcement of other political ideologies. Fascism obviously had nationalism at the core of its values. However, the concept of socialist internationalism also gave way to nationalism. Communist regimes, such as the Soviet Union and Communist China, created 'socialism in one country' and quarrelled over the 'proper' interpretation of the meaning of socialism along national lines while pursuing traditional national foreign-policy goals.

Nationalism remained the most powerful and widespread ideology in the world, influencing, challenging and defeating other ideologies. As has already been pointed out revolutionary communism, which stressed the common interests of the working class, evolved into 'national' socialism in most countries – especially when those movements took over the state.

Post-Cold War nationalism

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with the rise of 'globalisation' as a driving force for change in world society. There were also increasing attempts to strengthen international institutions as alternatives to states in international politics. Nationalism appeared to be an idea that had had its day; but it refused to die.

Decades of suppression among the nations of the USSR and Yugoslavia culminated in the demise of communism and the uprising of virulent nationalism in those societies. Wars broke out in Yugoslavia and several states of the former Soviet Union, resulting in massacres and widespread destruction. Nationalism remains a powerful force in many countries in Europe and in the developing world. If anything nationalism has had a new lease of life after the Cold War.

There are great movements of people taking place in the modern world, migration on a scale not seen since the late nineteenth century. Some historians have characterised it as comparable to the great *Volkswanderung* – people movements – of the fourth and fifth centuries AD that ended the classical world and gave birth to modern European nations. The USA is a nation of recent immigrants, and is still a major magnet for people seeking a better life. Nationalists often feel threatened by large-scale migration into their country. They feel that immigrants threaten their national identity. This is especially true of nationalists in European nations who are not influenced by the concept of the 'melting pot' of peoples that exists in the USA.

Nationalism and the serving of political interests

In any study of politics one sooner or later comes across the issue of who gains from a political programme and who loses. In the case of nationalism, there is a considerable debate among political scientists as to who benefits from nationalism as an ideology.

Nationalism can be seen as being intimately linked to the interests of the society as a whole. It is a product of the development of modern statehood and industrialisation. Over the last two centuries there has been massive social and technological change, involving scientific enquiry, greater rationality, the development of a more centralised state, greater social mobility and the prospect of social reform. These enormous changes created a modern sense of history and also an understanding of the processes of social change. Pre-industrial society and its deep emotional ties to traditional national identity was the major casualty of this vast social and intellectual change. Nationalism, as Ernest Gellner argues in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), became an ideological tool of elites to mobilise people to welcome change. The nation was

claimed to have deep historical roots, compensating people for the loss of their strong pre-industrial social ties.

Critics who oppose these social and economic changes also use nationalism as a support, appealing to some ancient ethnic past in their attacks on modernisation. This may manifest itself as an ethnic nationalism fighting the nationalism of a dominant national group within a state or against other competing national groups. For example, during the nineteenth century the subject nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire resisted Austrian and Hungarian domination and also asserted their national identity against each other and, especially, Jews. The empire was a seething pot of nationalism, ethnic rivalries and anti-Semitism.

The political uses of nationalist ideology depend on how one sees it in relation to other major ideological traditions.

Conservatives, for example, assert that nationalism creates social cohesion and social order. All people have a place and a valued role in the nation. The organic nature of the nation must be upheld, as being a natural social unit. Conservatives do not accept that patriotism and nationalism must lead to aggression and imperialism. Nevertheless, nationalism in late nineteenth-century Britain was used by the Conservatives as part of 'popular imperialism' to encourage political support for themselves and to support overseas expansion.

Liberals sometimes claim nationalism is closely linked to 'freedom', both national and individual. It is a means by which the common interests required to enable a society to function can be balanced against the necessary individualism of a free-market economy and a free society. Indeed, the idea of national self-determination and free trade is one of the major means by which world peace can be established.

Social democrats have a similar view to the liberals. They make more of a class analysis of nationalism, but many social democrats will stress the importance of the nation over the individual. In practice, social-democratic governments in modern democracies have shown themselves to be as nationalistic as governments of other ideological hues.

Marxists declare that nationalism is an ideological tool of the ruling capitalist classes and, as such, has developed out of industrialisation. Traditional Marxists claim that capitalists use nationalism to divert the working class from their 'true' predicament by encouraging a sense of commitment to 'national' identity: imperialism is one of the many unacceptable uses to which nationalism is put in the service of the interests of the capitalist class. Modern Marxists have argued that nationalism can have legitimacy when it is identified with the struggle for national independence of an oppressed nation, or when it is used as the means of challenging class power within a nation.

This holds true during both the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century and the liberation struggles against neo-colonialism today. Nationalism, often with a Marxist dimension, will sometimes be associated with demands for greater democracy in oppressed nations. This kind of 'revolutionary nationalism' will claim to be more democratic and liberating than 'old nationalism'.

The impact of nationalism

If, as it appears, nationalism is the most powerful ideology in modern politics, one needs to identify and discuss the ways in which it has transformed the modern world. In this section we will discuss the following areas:

- the psychological appeal of nationalism;
- national self-determination;
- nationalism and international politics;
- nationalism and the end of empires and multi-national states.

The psychological appeal of nationalism

Nationalism forms a vital focus of identification for citizens. Membership of a nation is emotional and intangible. The nation can satisfy people's basic psychological needs to identify with and belong to a group, to be part of something greater than oneself, to take part in something that lifts one out of the ordinary. People often complain that their lives are subject to uncomfortable pressures and control. Employers, social customs, lack of money all regularly stress, in a myriad ways, the essential powerlessness of most people. Identification with the nation, that 'super-individual' made of a collective 'we', can give individuals a sense of power, control, glory, success, greatness that they rarely, if ever, achieve in mundane, everyday life.

Membership of a nation is bound up with notions of collective consciousness. Increased contact with other national groups can stimulate consciousness of national differences, cultivate a feeling of 'us and them' divisions, and create and reinforce an impression of superiority over peoples of other nations. Regular conflicts between nations over centuries reinforce that sense of national identity. Irish nationalism was forged during the struggle against English power. English and French, Turk and Greek, Serb and Bosnian Muslim, Indian and Pakistani, all are nationalities wrought by centuries-old conflicts and wars, the cheering of victories, the brooding on defeats. History, or mythologised history, is therefore a crucial feature of nationalism.

National identification is stimulated by such myths, but also by flags, national anthems, martial music, founding fathers of the nation, images of the country – usually rural, rather than urban – and the national stereotyping of the members of other nations.

However, nationalism is only one of a number of ideologies competing for the attention and allegiance of an individual. Other ideologies, such as socialism or Marxism, may challenge nationalism. There may be competing nationalisms, such as 'British' and 'Scottish', or even a growing sense of 'European' identity. One can understand in these circumstances that a certain degree of psychological turmoil may affect a person.

National self-determination

Nationalism not only creates a sense of national identity. It presents the state as the most important form of political organisation for a people. Nationalism encourages the view that 'nations' should be governed by a 'state' made up of members of that nation. National self-determination really strengthens the validity of the state as an expression of 'nationhood'. This is not a new idea: 'All nations and reasonable men prefer to be governed by men of their own country and nation, who share the same language as them . . . rather than by strangers.'¹ If this desirable state could not be achieved peacefully then it was to be prosecuted by war, if necessary.

Nationalism seemed to offer freedom, wealth and power. Nineteenth-century Europe was characterised by the rise of nationalism as an ideology and the nationalisms of its many peoples. Indeed, the rise of nations was allied to the acquisition of statehood. Italy existed as a nation before its political unification into a state in 1860, as did Germany before Prussia created the Reich in 1871, but both were forged into nation-states by war. Both countries became steadily wealthier after they were unified. The national struggles of the Balkan nations against Turkish rule are further examples of the success of this new powerful ideology. For some nationalists in India and elsewhere if nationalism could be used by Europeans to overthrow an Asian empire in Europe, such as Turkey, perhaps it could be used by Asians to overthrow European empires in Asia. If sacrifice was required to achieve this, then nationalism provided the justifications for the struggle.

Nationalism acquired a considerable degree of legitimacy after the First World War through the concept of 'national-self determination'. President Woodrow Wilson had, at the Paris Peace Conference (1919), used American power and prestige to establish the principle of 'national self-determination' (although there was no clear formula as to what constituted a 'nation' to be 'self-determined'). This principle stated that 'all peoples are equal in their right to govern themselves as a nation' and was incorporated into both the Covenant of the League of Nations (1920) and the Charter of the United Nations (1945). The preamble to the UN Charter claims that its members ' . . . reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'.

Originally seen as an ideological and policy basis for the break-up of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires in Europe, this principle also contained the seed for dismantling the vast European empires in Africa and Asia. However, it took another world war and the fundamental weakening of the European colonial powers for this stage of imperial disintegration to take effect.

The logical consequence of the principle is the creation of ever-smaller states. The great majority would be poor, small, unstable, and, in a fundamental political and economic sense, unviable. This effect can be seen in the fragmented 'successor' states that appeared across Eastern Europe after the Versailles Treaty. Their existence between Germany and the USSR, weak states between powerful ones, helped to make war inevitable. The post-war break-up of the European empires created similar problems that have still not faded from the international system.

The problem with national self-determination as a major political principle is that few nations exactly correspond to the image of the nation-state. Most have national minorities within their borders. Sometimes this has led to the loss of territory to another state as a response to the vociferous demands of the minority (the Sudetenland Germans in Czechoslovakia during the 1930s, for example). Sometimes such minorities are expelled. In 1945–46 over 8 million Germans were expelled from Poland when its western frontiers were moved further west into formerly German territory. On the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947 millions of Muslims and Hindus moved, forcibly or peacefully, across the new international boundaries about to be created. It is estimated that over 2 million died. In Cyprus, Burma and Rwanda, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, national identity has been a source of violent expulsion of national and other ethnic minorities from a particular territory in the desire to create a 'pure' ethnic national identity.

European expansion spread the concept of the nation and nationalism right across the globe. Some form of national identification existed in most parts of the world, but that was often confined to ruling elites and often had little popular support. But it was the experience of European power and, usually, colonisation that stimulated the development of non-European nationalism.

Nationalism and international politics

Nationalism, as we have seen, developed in its modern form during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. First in France and then among the enemies of France, nationalism mobilised the powerful emotions of loyalty and fighting for a cause. By 1815 almost all the nations of Europe had become carriers of ideological nationalism. Evidently, the nineteenth century was the major formative era of modern nationalism. By the end of the century it was

a powerful political force in the politics of the emerging European democracies, the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the autocracy of the Russian Empire. All governments appealed to national images and national identity as means of building political legitimacy for their governments.

However, nationalism also contributed to increasing rivalry and suspicion between the Great Powers during the years before 1914. It promoted conflict by stressing the differences between nations, and stimulated arms races and the building of alliances. It also made peaceful resolution of differences by diplomacy increasingly difficult. Nationalism did not make war inevitable, but it made war more difficult to avoid, less easy to contain once begun, more violent and destructive as it progressed and extremely difficult to end. War became a struggle for whole nations, for national self-determination, even national survival. Thus war was intensified by becoming an ideological struggle of peoples, of popular passions, of national pride. Any questioning of the motives for which the war was fought, any demand for peace, was likely to be suppressed as potential or actual 'treason'. The greater the national sacrifices, the greater the demands for the war to go on until final victory for the nation was achieved.

Even more destructive was the Second World War. Fascists and Nazis used nationalism to strengthen their idea of the world being made up of nations struggling for survival. The 1930s experienced the world steady drifting towards conflict, and after 1939, the Second World War was on a scale of destruction unimaginable even after the 1914–18 War.

The defeat of the Axis powers by 1945 was not the end of nationalism as a powerful motivating ideology. The ideological conflicts of the Cold War, the struggles between Western democracy and communism, were given an edge by nationalism. Anti-communism in the USA became associated with 'Americanism', a set of ideological and national ideals that led to the creation of an 'Un-American Activities Committee' in the House of Representatives and the attempted suppression of any dissent characterised as 'unpatriotic'. The Soviet Union, Communist China and North Vietnam may all have claimed to be socialist states, but their rivalries with each other were deeply influenced by nationalism. Indeed, at times it is difficult to see where the 'socialism' lay in their exchange of vitriolic statements, while their 'nationalism' is clear. Almost all of the many wars and conflicts in the developing world during the Cold War and afterwards were impelled by nationalism and national aspirations.

Nationalism and the end of empires and multinational states

Nationalism played a crucial role in the overthrow of the European empires. Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, all nurtured a sense of national

identity even when they were part of the British Empire, eventually leading to their independence. In Africa and Asia, Western-educated nationalist elites sought the creation of new nations, but there was usually the lack of a strong sense of 'national' identity in these European colonies, compared with religious, ethnic, linguistic or other identities.

This is because the borders of most African and Middle Eastern states were established by European Great Powers mainly concerned with the international balance of power and showing little or no consideration for ethnic, linguistic or cultural affinities. The European withdrawal from the continent left 'nations' with little or no sense of nationalist identity and affinity among the bulk of the population: civil wars and political upheavals were too often the consequence. Middle Eastern states are also the result of balance of power politics following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. The claims of Iraq to Kuwait and Syrian interest in Lebanon are just two of the modern tensions in the region arising from a weak sense of nationalism among the members of the local states.

Elites, especially in Africa, tried to create a sense of national, racial or even continental identity but were themselves seen as somewhat 'alien'. They had often spent much time outside the country, usually in the colonial power, and were often thought to be connected with a particular ethnic group. Appeals to these broad identities were an attempt to skate over the very real differences between people who had little in common with the new 'national' identity. Many of the new nations were, in turn, riven by the demands of other competing divisions, often impelled by nationalism or at least ethnicity presented as nationalism. The stability of these countries often remains tentative: nationalist movements frequently grew up within the newly independent 'nations', creating forces for further disintegration. Biafra in Nigeria, India and Kashmir, Sikhs in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka all have involved and are still beset by levels of conflict that threaten the unity of the modern state.

In some societies, such as China, India and the Arab world, nationalists could appeal to 'real' national identities of ancient origin in their struggle with the Europeans. Nevertheless, colonial powers and their colonial boundaries moulded even their national identity. Appeals were made by some African and Arab politicians to identities that cut across nations, such as *Pan-Africanism*, *Pan-Arabism* and *Pan-Islamism*, often with little, or at most temporary, success. Usually 'traditional' nationalism was too powerful a force for such broad identities to have much popular appeal.

Anti-colonialism was especially linked to Marxism and socialism. Nationalism when seen as serving the interests of a colonial or capitalist elite was attacked, but 'revolutionary' nationalism was a challenge to the capitalist exploitation

of the world's poor. Only 'national' control of 'national' resources and the establishment of a new level of international justice could overcome the backwardness of the developing world.

The end of the Cold War was not the end of nationalism as a powerful force in world affairs. It has, in fact, become stronger in many countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the heir of the Russian Empire ('the prisonhouse of the nations', as Marx called it), was partly due to the failure to create a sense of Soviet nationalism as distinct from Russian nationalism. With the weakening of totalitarian controls under Gorbachev the suppressed nationalisms within the USSR helped break it up into nation-states. This process of disintegration has not ended there. National conflicts have exploded in Georgia, Armenia and the Chechnya region of Russia. Nationalist tensions were already present in the new nations of the post-Soviet states, where large Russian minorities lived within the boundaries of the 'new' nation. It is estimated that 25 million Russians live in the former states of the USSR outside the Russian Republic. Many ex-communist politicians reinvented themselves as nationalists in order to retain power as the Soviet state collapsed. Nationalism played a violent role in the break-up of Yugoslavia during the 1990s and the peaceful dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1992.

These forces of disintegration and re-creation can be seen in nations such as Canada and Britain, countries far more stable and well established than the communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the USSR. Canada's future is questionable because of the continuing conflicts between its English and French-speaking peoples. The UK, even, may disintegrate as a consequence of the various nationalisms within its multi-national state territory

The unification of Germany, on the other hand, seems to have stimulated nationalism in that country, especially in the former communist eastern part of the republic. In Western Europe the expansion of the European Union, both geographically and in its powers, appears to have stimulated a nationalist reaction to this 'usurpation' of many of the roles of the state. This has occurred both at the level of the formal state members of the EU and at sub-state, regional, levels with demands for 'national' recognition of the political aspirations of many nations: Welsh, Scots, Basques, Bretons, Corsicans. Most of this nationalist argument, one must recognise, pre-dates the European Union and the modern force of globalisation.

Critique of nationalism

Nationalism is out of favour in the West. Even the alleged ideological benefits of the nationalist tradition, such as its potential for social cohesion, are looked on askance. It has been subject to much criticism over the last fifty years.

Up to the mid-twentieth century, socialists believed that nationalism was a liberating ideology because of its support for national self-determination and anti-imperialism. However, they usually saw nationalism as, at best, a distraction from the class struggle and, more often, as a means of manipulating the working class, to divert it from the reality of its exploitation by the bourgeoisie. For most of the twentieth century nationalism, especially in the opinion of liberals and socialists, became identified with reaction, aggression, intolerance, war, religious bigotry and atrocity. It is certainly possible to make a case against it with reference to the Second World War, to the recent wars in the former Yugoslav and post-Soviet states, to the nationalist conflicts in the developing world, and the activities of various fascist movements in Europe and elsewhere.

Based on the nation, itself a concept with multifarious interpretations, and on an irrational, emotional response, nationalism remains a force for division and aggression. Assumptions that nations occupy distinct areas that they legitimately call 'theirs', and which are hallowed by history and validated by geography, are simply misguided. Minority groups, perceived as outside the larger national community, are frequently threatened by nationalist fervour. Nationalism may have arisen out of the eighteenth century, but it represents the dark alternative to the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

Nationalism is irrelevant to internationalists in a world where problems transcend national boundaries and must be addressed on a global basis. Liberals see it as an impediment to greater international co-operation and integration. From a conservative standpoint, competing nationalisms disrupt the social order. A socialist, like a Marxist, believes nationalism is at best a diversion from the class struggle, at worst a weapon used by exploiters to divide the international working classes.

The future of nationalism

After the Second World War nationalism was thought by many in Europe to be out of date and discredited, confined to the 'backward' parts of Europe – conservative, poor, often Catholic. By the 1960s and 1970s nationalism was back in fashion in many parts of Europe. It was used by many as the basis for resisting dominant nationalist and cultural values linked to the most powerful nations on earth, especially the USA. By the 1990s, 'globalisation' was used to describe a range of social and economic processes, long in existence but 'maturing' in the post-Cold War world. Nationalism and national identity were taken up by many on both the left and the right as ideological instruments to resist globalisation and assert the positive claims of cultural diversity in an increasingly homogenised world.

Within the UK nationalism was linked to the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s and the growth of regional and national disparities of wealth. This can be observed in the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism and their demands for better treatment from the British Government. Northern England has not been able to make a coherent 'national' claim, but shares a degree of resentment with the Celtic nations of the UK towards the economic, political and cultural dominance of London and the South-East of England.

Nationalism is still a major force in world affairs. Nevertheless, there are powerful economic and cultural forces undermining nationalism, usually described as 'globalisation', developing around multi-national corporations, banks, insurance companies, global communications, the dominance of the English language.

Globalisation creates new identities and new loyalties by its cultural and economic processes, but it also creates a potential 'backlash' of resistance to the 'threats' to national identity that it produces by its international, Westernised, homogenised character. Many people appeal to nationalist sentiments for an ideological basis to resist the 'McDonaldisation' of their culture.

Nationalism is used in a very broad sense to support the claims of 'identity' politics. Political claims are asserted by groups acutely aware of their identity – but an identity that falls short of being a nation as measured by the usual criteria. African-Americans constitute a fairly clearly delineated group with identifiable political goals. Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the 'Nation of Islam', has called for a separate state for black people in America. The Unionists in Northern Ireland might also be said to constitute a similar group, as do the Inuit in Canada. Northern Irish nationalists might aspire to a unification of Ireland but will settle, at least temporarily, for power-sharing with the Unionists. Flemish groups in Belgium focus on equal rights with the Walloon (French-speaking) population. Such groups may polarise around language, race and religion.

'Regional nationalism' is another sub-species of nationalism. It refers to a claim for regional autonomy, which nevertheless stops short of outright independence. A good example would be Catalan nationalism in Spain or the Northern League in Italy. In practice regionalism and nationalism often converge because nationalist parties perceive tactical political advantage in seeking the minimum goal of autonomy rather than full independence.

From a Western liberal perspective it is difficult not to be uneasy about nationalism. It is evidently still a powerful force. Even in Europe some forms of nationalism are clearly alive and well. It may be argued that it is possibly a countervailing force to the insidious processes of economic and cultural

globalisation, and in the confused and atomised societies undergoing profound changes it is a source of dignity, security and social cohesion. It is not likely to fade away in this century. Growing competition for water, oil, food, land and clear air is likely to be a feature of international and domestic political life during the twenty-first century, so war between nations is likely to continue.

Summary

Nationalism in some sense of the word can be traced back to pre-Renaissance times. In its modern sense, of having political implications, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. We can distinguish between 'ethnic nationalism', which links nation with race and language and birth, and 'civic nationalism', which links nation with citizenship, with no ethnic limitation on who is potentially a member of the nation. We can also distinguish between liberal, reactionary and radical nationalism. Furthermore, nationalism can fulfil a number of political functions such as promoting social change, creating social cohesion, or strengthening the hold of the ruling class. Nationalism has had an immense impact in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in undermining empires and multi-national states. To critics, this process has not necessarily been beneficial; witness the atrocities committed in its name in, for example, Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, even in the 'global' society of the twenty-first century it remains a powerful force.

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SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 Is it possible to argue a rational case for nationalism?
- 2 How useful is it to distinguish between liberal nationalism, reactionary nationalism and radical nationalism?
- 3 'Nationalism has a very bad press today, one which is undeserved when one considers the contribution nationalism has made to the progress of human culture.' Why might you agree or disagree with this statement?
- 4 Which form of nationalism characterises contemporary nationalist movements?
- 5 Can we expect an increase or decrease in nationalist sentiment in the twenty-first century?

