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978-0-521-60364-5 - The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas

Aviel Roshwald

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Introduction

Nationalism pervades the modern world, yet its origins, nature, and prospects remain clouded by confusion and controversy. Identified as a quintessentially modern phenomenon by many scholars, it is seen as rooted in pre-modern traditions by a dissenting minority. Embraced as a vital framework for democratic self-determination by some, it is decried as the mortal enemy of tolerance and liberalism by others. Commonly dismissed as a thing of the past by post-1945 observers, nationalism has been the object of renewed fascination since the end of the Cold War, as events such as the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav wars, China's growing preoccupation with the Taiwan question, and the surge of collective emotion in the United States following the September 11 attacks have highlighted nationalism's enduring power to shape history.

Although nationalism is routinely described as complex and paradoxical, there remains a strong tendency to fit it into rigid typological categories. Many theorists of nationalism have drawn useful, yet overly sharp, distinctions between national and religious identities, between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism, and between nationalism's linear conception of history and the non-linear temporal sensibilities of pre-modern eras, to take just a few examples. Such compartmentalized analytical approaches have begun to come under increasing critical scrutiny on the part of some social scientists. But there remains a wide gap between the most influential conceptual approaches to nationalism and the scores of historical monographs and studies of individual cases of nationalism that have appeared in recent years. The flow of new information and novel analytical perspectives emerging from these studies has exceeded the carrying capacity of many of the existing theoretical paradigms – particularly those that adhere to the view that nationalism can only be understood as a strictly modern, fundamentally secular phenomenon.¹

This book places the paradoxical qualities of nationalism at the focal point of its analytical endeavor. I contend that the very contradictions

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and dilemmas that inhere in nationalism play a central – if often unacknowledged – role in the development of national identities and the historical evolution of nationalist ideologies and institutions. It is precisely its position at the intersection of conflicting principles and sentiments – and the abiding appeal of its unrealizable promise to reconcile these clashing elements – that lends nationalism much of its endurance. Nationalists and the nation-state hold forth hope for a resolution of the tensions between the inescapable reality of historical change and the persistent thirst for continuity of tradition, between the clashing interests of complex societies and the aspiration to a solidarity transcending all classes and parties, between the sense of the nation's uniqueness in the world and the belief that it has a mission to humanity. Like the rabbit in a greyhound race, the harmonization of such divergent impulses always remains just out of reach, yet all the more mesmerizing an objective for that. Rival parties and movements often claim to hold the key to resolving such dilemmas if only they are entrusted with power; the resultant debates and struggles among proponents of competing nationalist agendas have dominated the political and cultural histories of many countries. Nationalism is a dynamic force fueled by competing visions of an idealized, static community.

This study commences with a chapter in which I develop the claim that nationalism existed in the ancient world. This may strike some readers as an odd way to begin a book focused on the dilemmas of nationalism in the modern world. But it is my sense that many of the critical paradoxes of modern nationalism have pre-modern antecedents. Specifically, in the cases of the ancient Jews and Greeks, not only did some of the dilemmas they faced in defining and demarcating their identities *anticipate* modern problems of nationalism; the ways in which they thought about these issues (e.g. the relationship between national particularism and ethical/religious universalism, or between kinship and citizenship) served as influential paradigms that *helped shape* modern constructions of national identity. By the same token, the elements that distinguish modern nationalism from its pre-modern forms cannot be discussed in an informed and coherent manner unless one places the phenomenon of nationalism in a deep diachronic context, rather than assuming that its contemporary incarnation bears no relation to anything that happened prior to the dawn of the modern age.

The rest of the book is organized thematically around a selection of ostensibly opposing forces and ideas whose intimate interaction has played a vital role in the shaping of national identities and ideologies.

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Each chapter will focus on a particular dilemma faced by many if not most nationalisms, employing an assortment of examples and case-studies to explore in concrete, historical terms some of the various ways in which the issue has played out. It is my hope that this comparative, synthetic method will contribute to refining some of our conceptual approaches to nationalism. At the same time, I must acknowledge my enormous debt to the countless scholars on whose research and analysis this study relies; I make no claim to having uncovered new information about any individual example of nationalism. I should also make it clear that in criticizing certain theories of nationalism I do not mean to dismiss the value of these works or to disparage their authors' contributions. On the contrary, the clarity and incisiveness of many of these scholars' arguments has contributed enormously to our very capacity to discuss nationalism in a coherent manner and at an analytically useful level of abstraction. In the absence of such powerfully developed theses to disagree with, I would not have been able to write this book.

* * *

Before embarking on the substance of this study, some definitions are in order. I will use the term "nation" to refer to any community larger than one of mutual acquaintance that claims some form of collective, bounded, territorial sovereignty *in the name of its distinctive identity*, or any population in its capacity as a society on whose behalf such claims are asserted.² "Nationalism" refers to any ideology or set of attitudes, emotions, and mentalities based on the assertion of such claims (regardless of whether or not those claims have been fulfilled). "Nation-state" will signify a sovereign polity that claims to embody or represent the identity and will of one particular nation (however disputed and problematic such a claim may be). "Ethnic group" and "nationality" will be used interchangeably to refer to a population larger than an actual kinship group that considers itself – or is considered by a significant proportion of its members – to be bound together by common ancestry and historical experience, as manifested in shared cultural characteristics (including emotional attachment to a specific territory) that mark it apart from the rest of humanity. It should be noted that, on the basis of these definitions, an ethnic group need not have a fully developed sense of nationalism; conversely, a nation can employ criteria other than shared ethnicity in defining itself. For instance, a distinctive political culture might be stressed instead as the source of national identity, as in the case of Americans' shared reverence for their Constitution. (See Chapter 5.)

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The term “nation-state” is used advisedly in this volume. As many scholars have pointed out, the uncritical conflation of the terms “nation” and “nation-state” has led to tremendous analytical confusion.³ The relationship between nation and nation-state is certainly a complicated and often inconsistent one. The legal structures and official policies of the nation-state may be at odds with popular conceptions of national identity and interest. Disaffected minorities may resist the nation-state by establishing separatist movements designed to create nation-states of their own, while xenophobic majorities may claim that the nation-state is not worthy of the name unless it cracks down on aliens within and/or enemies without. Some nationalists may claim that the nation-state’s laws and principles of government embody the essence of the nation’s identity while others may insist that those institutions serve merely to protect the culture and tradition that constitute the essence of the nation’s soul. Yet to recognize such complications does not justify simply doing away with the term “nation-state.” After all, insofar as aspiration to independent statehood is one of the defining characteristics of nationalism, it is impossible to have a coherent discussion of nationalism unless it is juxtaposed with both the idealized image and the practical manifestation of the nation-state. It is precisely the tension between how nationalists envision the nation-state and how it functions once their dream of independence has been fulfilled that contributes to many of the dilemmas that this book proposes to examine.

I should also point out that the way in which I employ the term “nation-state” is not so indiscriminating as to encompass all territorially sovereign entities. Politics based on ideals and institutions such as universal religious community, the patrimonial state, the lord–vassal relationship, multi-ethnic empire, or international class solidarity, are not nation-states insofar as their claims to legitimacy are not directly dependent on a particularistic identity ascribed to the governed.

Finally, it is a common practice to distinguish between “patriotism” and “nationalism,” such that the former term refers to selfless loyalty to a polity and its governing institutions while the latter describes prior attachment to a nation rather than a state.⁴ “Patriotism” is widely used to mean devotion to an already existing, independent state, with “nationalism” then used in a restricted way to depict the attitude and ideology associated with the struggle for the establishment of a sovereign nation-state. Such terminological usage may be appropriate for some analytical purposes. It is not useful in the context of this book. In effect, the terminological territory covered by “patriotism” overlaps extensively with

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that embraced by the term “civic nationalism” (see Chapter 5), and it is one of the points of this study to explore how civic and ethnic, political and cultural, classical and modern, conceptions of identity interact and shape one another. Treating “patriotism” as a discrete category, conceptually segregated from “nationalism,” would impoverish our understanding of the dialectical phenomena – including the tangled relationship between nation and state – whose analysis lies at the heart of this book.⁵

All of these definitions and distinctions are necessarily, yet sometimes frustratingly, abstract. The cut-and-dried categories of human identity and experience that form the basis for many nationalist claims are themselves belied by the complexities of socio-cultural bonds and loyalties. In practice, human identities are more intricate and multidimensional than any typological pigeon-hole or nationalist slogan can adequately convey. The unavoidable oversimplifications of theoretical discussions of nationalism and nationalist rhetoric alike make matters very confusing to thoughtful observers, who will note that no single instance of alleged nationhood appears to conform perfectly to any abstract definition of nationhood. Particularly troubling is the apparent disjuncture between the widely prevalent claim that the nation is a culturally and socially homogeneous collectivity and the kaleidoscopic reality of human loyalties and affections. Such conundrums give rise to perplexing questions. Is a Bavarian or a Texan still a German or an American if s/he feels a strong sense of regional as distinct from national loyalty? Why do Ulster’s Protestants define themselves as British rather than Irish, whereas England’s Catholics today generally see themselves – and are seen – as loyal Britons? Why did Yugoslavia break apart amidst horrific ethnic warfare even though members of many of the opposing forces spoke mutually intelligible versions of the same language?

The general response to these sorts of questions is that there is no one set of objective socio-cultural criteria that defines national identity. Identity is by its very nature a subjective experience, and national identity is no exception to this pattern. People may latch onto any set of shared characteristics as a basis for claiming nationhood and the right to territorial self-determination associated with it.

Furthermore, no matter what criteria for nationhood become established as social or political norms, in practice, within any given nation, people’s loyalties and cultural attributes will fall along an ever-fluctuating gradient ranging from very close correlation with an idealized set of national identity markers to complete non-conformity with, and alienation from, the “official version” of nationhood.⁶ Divergences from a

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dominant conception of national identity may result in conflict and may spawn separatist movements that espouse nationalist claims in their own right. Alternatively, they may be accommodated within the fold of an overarching nationalism that treats regional or sectarian loyalties and minority cultures as building-blocks of the nation rather than as threats to its unity.⁷ It is one of the central challenges of any nationalist movement or regime to find ways of marginalizing, assimilating, co-opting, and/or harmonizing those aspects of individual and social identities that appear to threaten the homogeneity and cohesiveness of the nation. How developments unfold depends on a variety of specific circumstances and choices. Texan and Bavarian identities can be seen as taking the form of sub-nationalism, insofar as – for a variety of historical, cultural, and institutional reasons – they are comfortably nested within the overarching frameworks of American and German national identities, respectively. Were a significant proportion of Texans or Bavarians to decide that their right to self-determination was no longer adequately served by their countries' federal systems of government, and that full sovereignty was the only remedy for their grievances, one could speak of a full-fledged Texan or Bavarian nationalism.

To point out the tension between the simplistic ideal of national identity and the complexities that lie beneath its surface is not to diminish nationalism's importance. The fact that people disagree and change their minds about which nation they belong to and what belonging to it means does not make the desire to belong to a nation any the weaker. On the contrary, it is its confrontation with such inescapable, existential dilemmas that lends nationalism much of its emotional force, historical significance, and continued political salience, as the rest of this book will attempt to show.

END NOTES

- 1 For a critical discussion of these and other problems in the literature on nationalism, see Robert Wiebe, "Imagined Communities, Nationalist Experiences," *Journal of the Historical Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 33–63. My thanks to Richard Kuisel for this reference. See also Peter Stearns, "Nationalisms: An Invitation to Comparative Analysis," *Journal of World History*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1997), 57–74.
- 2 I am influenced here by Benedict Anderson's definition in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991), 6. This paragraph as a whole paraphrases and slightly revises the definitions I employed in Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and*

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the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923 (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.

- 3 Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), ch. 4.
- 4 See John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton (Lord Acton), “Nationality” (essay first published in 1862) in Dalberg-Acton, *The History of Freedom and other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 292; Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 196; Andrew Vincent, *Nationalism and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 5. For a trenchant critique of the widespread distinction between what are seen as virtuous patriotism and nasty nationalism, see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 55–59.
- 5 See Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 5.
- 6 For a useful case study, see Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). King demonstrates that not a few residents of early-to-mid-nineteenth-century Bohemia straddled the Czech–German ethno-cultural/linguistic boundary before the rise of modern nationalism forced them to affiliate themselves exclusively with one group or the other. However, I am not convinced by his inference that applying the very concept of ethnicity to earlier historical periods is anachronistic.
- 7 Cf. Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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CHAPTER I

Nationalism in antiquity

Precisely because mythmaking is such an essential feature of human belief systems, social scientists have made the debunking of myths one of the essential tools of their trade.¹ The stories peoples, communities, and movements tell about themselves are seen as masks that must be pulled away if their true faces are to be revealed. This approach has been particularly apparent in the recent study of nationalism. As an ideology that seeks to create a broad yet cohesive framework for collective and individual identities alike, nationalism relies heavily upon the simplification and distortion of history, the propagation of beliefs about all-encompassing ties of blood and sentiment, and the disavowal of social, economic, and cultural differences that contradict the all-important themes of unity and fraternity. One of the distinguishing characteristics of nationalism as an ideology has been its attempt to portray itself as a manifestation of what already exists – the political expression of an identity and culture that has been around since time immemorial. Scholars of nationalism have accordingly focused their efforts on exposing how nationalist movements have shaped the very social and cultural conditions and invented the very traditions upon which they stake their claims to legitimacy.²

Like any successful methodology, this approach can be taken too far. In their zealous effort to gain critical distance from nationalists' propagandist claims, many scholars have gone to the other extreme, portraying modern national identities as social and ideological constructs created out of whole cloth by self-serving elites, by impersonal material forces, or by some combination of the two.³ Among the shortcomings of this interpretive school is that it can become so preoccupied with the manipulative role of social and political elites that – like some of those elites themselves – it loses sight of the role of the popular masses in shaping national identities. One of the most underexamined issues in the existing scholarship is the question of what determines the receptivity or resistance of

popular culture to the nationalist ideas disseminated by elites and how the sensibilities and attitudes of the targeted audience shape those ideas.⁴

This problem is, in turn, related to the issue of how to date nationalism's origins. Do modern nationalist movements build on preexisting forms of social and historical identity, or do they fashion ostensibly ancient identities out of thin air? In many cases, historians have clearly established that nationalist claims of ancient roots are quite devoid of foundation. Slovak nationalists' assertions of an unbreakable chain of cultural continuity between their modern community and the ninth-century CE Great Moravian Empire, or Spanish-speaking Mexican nationalists' cooptation of the legacy of the Mayas and Aztecs, serve as ready-made strawmen that scholars of nationalism can knock down to their hearts' content.⁵ The most cursory investigation can readily establish that many of the long-since departed states or societies which contemporary nationalists have latched onto in their quest for historical legitimacy actually have little or nothing in common culturally, demographically, or linguistically with their would-be historical descendants. Making such spurious claims to an unbroken chain of historical continuity where no demonstrable connection exists is referred to as a form of "primordialism" – one of the most common features of nationalism and one of the most easily ridiculed.⁶

There are two pitfalls in the debunking of primordialism. One is the failure to acknowledge that some contemporary national cultures may have longer histories of continuous development than others. Exposing the spuriousness of some historical claims does not *ipso facto* reduce all such claims to nonsense, yet many scholars seem to make just that assumption. To be sure, the assertion that the antiquity of a society's origins lends added legitimacy to its latter-day political or territorial claims is based on subjective, ideological, and psychological perceptions, and cannot be rationally proved or disproved. But in questioning this principle, critics of nationalism have jumped to the unwarranted conclusion that no given social identity can possibly be much older than another and, indeed, that national identity did not exist anywhere on the face of the planet prior to 1789, or some other arbitrarily chosen date marking the birth of the modern era. This is a defensive overreaction to nationalism's politicization of history, and it warrants reexamination. I would contend that – to cite a few examples – Armenian, Chinese, or Jewish claims to a chain of cultural transmission linking their modern societies to an ancient past have greater credibility than analogous Slovak or Mexican claims. This does not make Jewish nationalism more real or legitimate than Slovak nationalism

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(although a credible link to an ancient past may well enhance the mass resonance of a nationalist movement⁷). Nor does this mean that any formulation of national identity, whether associated with an ancient tradition or not, is somehow immune to the constant flux and change of history. What this does suggest is that rumors of nationalism's recent birth as a general phenomenon have been greatly exaggerated.⁸

It is quite true that most modern national identities either took form quite recently or are different in significant respects from their pre-modern antecedents. It is also true that during the early Middle Ages and beyond, European states were far too weakly constituted to form viable frameworks for the crystallization of national identities.⁹ But it is a logical fallacy to deduce from this that national identity could not have existed in any form or at any time prior to the onset of modernity. The fact that most contemporary nations arose in modern times leaves open the possibility that other nations could have existed in pre-modern eras – nations that subsequently disappeared, merged into other collectivities, or evolved into novel cultural, political, and institutional forms. The fact that medieval Europe lacked nation-states by virtue of lacking well-defined states does not preclude the possibility that more firmly established ancient and/or non-European states might have generated, or arisen from, nationalist sentiments. It is certainly *conceivable* that nationalism is in fact an exclusively modern phenomenon, but this should not be an *unquestioned assumption*; it is an assertion that demands proof and that has not, in fact, been convincingly demonstrated.

My own working hypothesis is that the idea of nationhood as well as the phenomenon of national consciousness and its expression in nationalism are not exclusively modern, but have appeared in various forms, among diverse societies, throughout much of the history of literate civilization. I am not alone in trying to push back the chronological boundaries of nationhood. Anthony Smith has argued that the success of modern nationalisms in garnering public support has rested on their selective utilization and adaptation of pre-modern images, myths, and symbols of ethnic community. He has gone so far as to express openness to the idea of nations existing in antiquity. Adrian Hastings contended that literate culture, not the printing press (as Benedict Anderson would have it), is the essential precondition and foundation for the creation of national communities, and went on to explore the phenomenon of national identity in the European Middle Ages and Early Modern period.¹⁰

In this chapter, I wish to carry Adrian Hastings' thesis to what I see as its logical conclusion. Hastings highlights the centrality of the Hebrew