

The way to a new world order is through, not against, more particular loyalties

Nationalism, Identity, and a More Secure World Order

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Human beings find their dignity and honor in their identities. In the modern world, for various reasons, the most powerful form of identity has become national or ethnic identity. It is this that makes nationalism a more powerful force in shaping feelings and determining the structures of our world than even the great ideologies and religions. This fact is often obscured because we conduct political debate in terms of philosophies, whether they concentrate on economic arrangements or on constitutional structures: The confrontations are posed in terms of capitalism and socialism, democracy and totalitarianism, liberalism and Marxism. These are not, of course, unimportant issues, but they operate mostly within the matrix of the nation-state. The common assumption is that each state should have its nation and each nation its state.

Ideology may in fact clothe the cause of national reconstruction. It was easy to overlook the essentially national character of the Chinese Revolution and to regard it as part of a homogeneous Marxist drive for planetary revolution. Indeed, there is a simple reason why ideologists become nationalists: A revolution seizes control in a state that typically claims to have its nation, and then "the people" becomes inevitably identified with that nation, or at least with the now dominating group in that nation. The workers of the world may or may not unite, but when President Ceaușescu talks about "the people," he means the Rumanian people (and some Hungarian-speaking Rumanian nationals suspect he really means the Rumanian-speaking Rumanians).

That we should be clear about our attitude to nations is vital for a number of reasons. First, we may note that so many modern miseries have sprung from questions of national identity and aggrandizement. To them can be attributed war in Ethiopia, the Indochina saga, bombing in the Basque country, Hitler's Third Reich, killings

in Ireland, Israel and the Palestinian problem, conflict in Cyprus, the deportation of the Crimean Tartars...and so on. Second, we are far from solving the problem of how different national and other groups can live together peacefully in the same territory. Third, the terrible increases in state power may give to nationalism a new and awesome meaning: It may unleash nuclear war.

In any case, nationalism is an expression of search for dignity (which is good) but in a dangerous manner, for the very intensity of the national group's demands upon the individual creates a voracious need for emotional justification, and this is most easily satisfied through hatred and xenophobia, especially if these can be solemnized through a "cause." In brief, we often gain our group identity by setting ourselves over against other groups, and this process is more effective when conflict is given a sacred aura. Thus, though national dignity and the dynamism it can release are good political ends, the problem is to find ways in which they do not inevitably conflict with the dignity and dynamism of other groups.

For ideological or religious reasons we may have a skeptical attitude, ultimately, to the patriotisms of the world. From the angle of liberalism and individualism, a person has his worth intrinsically, and his dignity does not depend upon his social group; from the angle of (for instance) Christianity, the true solidarity of the Christian is with Christ and in the Church—and this solidarity thus transcends nationality. It is thus cause for anguish that nations such as the USA and Great Britain, committed to liberal democracy, have, out of patriotism and in the name of national security, sometimes acted counter to liberal principles in choosing whom they support abroad. There is also anguish in the fact that Christians, motivated by competing nationalisms, have fought against each other in the trenches and on the steppes.

Now it may be argued that, realistically, such conflicts have to be accepted; thus in a world of threat and counterthreat it may be important for a democracy such as the U.S. to support regimes not noted for their liberalism, if only because in the long run the cause of democracy must survive the menace of totalitarianism.

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Still, there is some advantage in being clear about how we regard nationalism, since finally, as we have indicated, democratic or other political arrangements will take national forms.

Also, it is easy to take the somewhat airy view that ultimately men will get beyond nationalism. Nationalism is irrational (we may think) and divisive: better that we have world government, or declare at least ourselves citizens of the world, or just live as individuals, treating all others simply in terms of their individuality, not their ethnic or cultural identity. But what if others do not see it this way? Our foreign or minority friends, feeling strongly that sense of solidarity we airily decry, may not wish to abandon their heritages.

I shall argue that we should accept, and in some measure prize, nationalism, but transcend it. This means that we may use it positively in the cause of creating a less dangerous and more fair international structure.

What, then, gives the idea of the nation so much power in the modern world? How is it that the last two centuries, roughly from the time of the French Revolution, have seen the growth of the nation-state—the unification of Germany, the *Risorgimento*, the redrawing of boundaries in Eastern Europe along roughly national lines at Versailles, the emergence of Asian nations after World War II, and so on?

Ernest Renan remarked that the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite. He thought of the nation as based on two things—a memory of common sufferings and a will to live together. There is some truth in that. It is not, of course, absolutely necessary for a nation to suffer, and in any case it is only certain sorts of suffering that count; what is important is that oppression and humiliation occur at the hands of others. That is the potent engine for creating a sense of solidarity and a thirst for group dignity. But in all this, and in understanding the history of nineteenth-century Europe, so powerful a womb of nationalism, we need to know what creates the sense of the group. Why live together? For what do we vote in the plebiscite? This is where theorists of nationalism get into trouble, since nation-states vary so widely in their composition: They can be predominantly of one language and one religion and one race; or predominantly of one language and one religion and differing races; they can vary in language, but not in religion and race; they can vary in linguistic and ethnic groups, but not in religion or ideology; and so on.

Still, there is a “classical” form of nationalism, and that is to be found in Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: basically linguistic, reshaping the history of the folk, productive of a new flowering of the arts, amplified by modernization, inimical to the jigsaws of territories that, long after the feudal era, still expressed a feudal attitude to political power. Increasing industrialization, primary schooling, conscription, new constitutional arrangements—these helped toward the establishment of a “modern” state, and a new, largely secular, but for all that emotional, ideology. Thus the relatively new project of writing scientific history had a flowering in the more mythic

exercise of representing a country’s past; folklorists likewise delved into folkish pasts; musicians wrote up the music of the people and created new national styles; poets and novelists celebrated the newly prestigious vernacular language; the intellectuals, in a sense, became a new priesthood, and the patriotic religion took on a firm shape.

Freedom was seen as national independence, primarily. The country would develop, through its new identity, the potential contained in its historic past. That past was celebrated through a new revival of the arts, and was given actuality in the new schooling of the masses. Thus the nation was thought to have a destiny, rooted in the identity supplied by the myth contained in its history. As Goethe said: “the best thing about history is the enthusiasm it arouses.” Symbolizing the new spirit of the nation were the flag, the anthem, the uniforms of the army, the new memorials to old heroes, the opera house, and so forth. It helped in this that there was a rich and educated middle class whose spokesmen could express a kind of national identity and spirit rooted in the same soil as the peasants. Modern men somehow acquired new ancestors: warriors and saints in the past, from Vlad the Impaler to Queen Libushe, from Ivan the Terrible to St. Patrick.

Invisibly and secretly, the national language (not identical with the countryside’s dialects and regional variations) became by its very use a ritual bond. By its very slant education became an initiation of the young into the new national group. By wars and disasters, by the struggle for independence, the nation went through rites of passage establishing its identity. By the issuing of passports and the setting up of difficult frontiers the territory became a special place; in effect the land became the icon of the nation-state. In a new sense men were to become territorial animals.

If anything, the sense of identity is even stronger under socialism, even if, perhaps, the history has to be rewritten to erase something of the bourgeois mind. In socialist countries the state becomes omnipresent in its economic and cultural activities. In principle there is no activity that is not somehow a contribution to the nation’s welfare and the people’s substance.

Negatively, modernization has dissolved some of the old bonds intermediate between the nuclear family and the nation. The wider family and the web of village life are weakened by urbanization, mobility, and other effects of industrialization. Relative rootlessness was receptive to wider identity, through the folk. It was no accident that anti-Semitism should flourish in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe: The Jews claimed a different legendary history, and they had a different kind of solidarity.

To alter Renan: The new nation was a daily sacrament. Patriotism would prove to be a powerful new religion. It triumphed in World War I over the international solidarity of the working class.

Nationalism also proved to be a strong European export. Imperial aggrandizement and the conquest of great parts of Asia and Africa stimulated the formation of new, but often anciently

rooted, identities. The Hindu middle class, emerging under the wing of the Raj, shaped for itself a new Indian past, and a new national ideology. For the Raj imparted to Indians two important stimuli of nationalism: a new educational system and the humiliation of being conquered. In very differing ways China and Japan reshaped themselves for the task of modernization and of being able to "stand up to" the West. By contrast, in Africa it was above all territorial identity that counted: hence postindependence Africa is heavily engaged in nation-building—if you have a state but no true nation, why, you must create a nation. (Sometimes it may be felt that there is a nation but no state—hence, for example, the Nigerian civil war and the Eritrean resistance to the Ethiopian Empire. The internationalism of Islam somewhat modifies Arab nationalisms; and the picture is different in the New World, notably in Latin America.

The United States can be considered a variant on the classical European pattern. It had little mythic past. Indeed in the nineteenth century, with the influx of various populations out of Europe, the legendary pasts had to be abolished: It was not much good the Poles becoming enamoured of Polish liberty, or the Italians of some pan-Italian *Risorgimento*. The new identity was cemented by belief in doctrine (the Constitution), feelings of solidarity expressed and implemented through American civil religion and the school (including the sports) system, and a myth of modernity and of the future. The future is brought in to redress the balance of the past. It became an important task for American artists and writers to begin to fashion a new American cultural heritage. In the creation of the new identity, however, the twin bonds of economic unity and the educational system have proved most vital: in the process intermediate loyalties between nuclear family and the nation-state have been given only limited scope, while communities within the community have, if they show signs of a kind of theocracy at odds with national loyalty, been treated with suspicion and more. Witness the Mormons in earlier days and the Unification Church of the Reverend Moon today. But precisely because of the doctrinal character of American patriotism it has been easy for American statesmen to overlook the very power of nationalism that has animated so much of modern international politics and to see issues in the light of a struggle between the "free world" and international Marxism. The Soviets, having translated an imperial heritage into a revolutionary doctrine, have likewise underestimated nationalist forces, in Yugoslavia, China, Albania, Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and elsewhere. Where the Soviets have gained important influence it is through support of national independence against external domination or of national integrity against external attack, as in Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola, Southern Yemen, and once Somalia.

Nationalism is, then, the most powerful new religion: It demands martyrs, creates heroes, feeds on a mythic past, wields symbols of power, looks to a future destiny, asks us to love our neighbors but not our enemies, celebrates origins and victories, sanctifies group pride, assigns meaning to even the most humdrum activities. The Indian on hearing of the explosion of an atomic

device, the American on seeing Americans gain the Moon, the Japanese contemplating the latest increase in the GNP, the Brazilian seeing his team win, the Egyptian learning of the Suez crossing—these people are expanded thereby, their lives (they feel) touched with a little glory.

If territory and linguistic-*cum*-cultural heritage do not coincide, troubles are at hand. Moreover, nationalism is sometimes dangerously aggressive. But the force of nationalism has to be accepted, and this may pose a problem for both the liberal who, in the pursuit of individual liberty, devalues the wider loyalties of the nation and for the internationalist who looks to a common humanity as uniting us. We need a new political approach if the force of nationalism is to be used constructively. Unfortunately, some of the panaceas of modern times have been destructive. Thus one man one vote is a good democratic principle if men vote within the common assumptions of a group, but not if one group is pitted against another; then it is a license for the oppression of the minority by the majority. Again, modernization has to bear some relation to a nation's conception of its destiny, or it may turn out to be disruptive of the old society rather than productive of a new one. Marxist prescriptions can lead to the wholesale homogenization of culture with fatal effects both on the heritage of the past and the culture of minorities. Northern Ireland, Iran, and Tibet are instances of these problems and others, but they are far from being the only ones.

In a perfectly refined international community each group would have its own state and its own territory; or at least it would have a protected place within each state. Let us consider, for the sake of argument, the "perfect" model (leaving aside the question as to whether it is really desirable). I think the following beliefs would prevail: *first*, that it would be wrong for one nation-state to try to take territory from another; *second*, where there are gross disparities of economic resources some equalization should occur to ensure reasonable sufficiency among the poorer nation-states.

Part of the argument for this second requirement is that human beings have rights, among other things to some "sufficiency" of resources, provided that there is enough to go round. It might by the same token be thought that, morally, one state or a group of states has a right to intervene in the affairs of another if in the latter there is great oppression—for example, widespread and systematic cruelty (consider Senator McGovern's argument for intervention in Cambodia advanced last year). This is based upon the belief that human beings have rights as individuals, independent of the national (or other) group to which they belong.

Thus a strand in modern humanism stresses the essential uniqueness of the person. The argument for equal rights as between groups (for instance, the argument for equal treatment for blacks or women) is that personalism is as it were color blind; a person is not to be measured by the adventitious properties, whether natural or culturally acquired, that tie him to a group or

category. But the fact is that so many problems about human rights are about groups—the oppression of one ethnic or other group by another. It is therefore common sense to treat the problems directly in terms of group relationships. A major source of modern collisions is the combination of nation-building with territorial mixtures. By the latter I mean the situation in which more than one population occupies the same territory—for instance, where the nation-state covers the territory of a minority nationality (examples are Rumania with its Hungarian population in Transylvania; Finland with its Swedish minority in the Aland Islands and elsewhere; Canada with its French population in Quebec; and so forth). It is more complex where the dominant and minority groups are mingled together without there being substantive territories in which the minority is the majority; sometimes there is both intermixture and a pattern of small minority enclaves (thus Northern Ireland, Malaysia, much of the Caribbean). For brevity I shall refer to the two types as the major-minor situation, and the mingled situation. There are obviously even more complex variants. Many cities of the world are tending toward the mingled state.

In the major-minor kind of collision nationalism appears to dictate a nation-building in which all citizens of the territory are asked to affirm the values of the majority group. For instance, the major language is likely to become the national language, and such homogenization of the nation is a threat and perceived humiliation for the minor group. Thus there is likely to occur a kind of “internal aggression” against the minority group.

Similar problems can arise in the mingled state. The humanist can easily propose an equally threatening homogenization by proposing that all members of groups should have exactly the same education, or that each person should be regarded individually and without too much regard to his cultural identity. Thus when I was teaching in Birmingham, England, a city of such mingled population that it is said that the typical inhabitant wears a shamrock in his turban, there were those who under the (apparently liberal) slogan of integration wished to bring Pakistanis, Sikhs, West Indians, and other minority groups into such integrated harmony with the dominant English culture that it involved their increasingly being deprived of their traditional identities. In the minority situation problems of insecurity arise most strongly when people are deprived of the resources that cultural identity can provide.

I think that the nearer we get to the “perfect” model of one-territory-one-cultural-group the less we shall be faced with problems of oppression. One should, in brief, encourage as much independence as possible. Yet there are practical and theoretical objections to such “perfect territoriality.” First, there may be economic and geographical reasons against it, since natural frontiers may constitute an advantage but not run along ethnic joints. Second, in so many cases cultural diversity in a state is of a mingled kind and one cannot disentangle the cultural groups except with great suffering—though sometimes, as with Greece and Turkey in 1923, it may turn out that population exchange is the

only solution. Third, there may be positive reasons for federalism, which is a way of dealing with imperfect territoriality. Fourth, mobility between societies is educative, profitable, and hard to eliminate: that there should be Greeks in London, English people in New York, Germans in Rome, and Japanese in San Francisco enriches the host societies and, one likes to believe, the migrants alike.

Realistically, then, we should move to a politics of pluralism. All cultural groups should be accorded dignity, and ultimately we should work toward a kind of proportional equality. That is because great disparity in the wealth of nations is a potent source of tension and in the long run is in no one’s interest. Moreover, federal internal arrangements are a means of preserving a wider economic grouping while acknowledging national differences.

As odd as it may seem, we may learn something from the Indian caste system. We are often so preoccupied by the undoubted evil of untouchability and the problems of a hierarchical stratification of society that we do not notice how the caste system does by its mechanisms allow people of differing customs to live together in the same territory. India, for all its problems, is an enormous experiment in plural living. At any rate, in mingled states and areas such as Northern Ireland new experiments need to be conducted in federalism—that is, through separate electoral rolls for those who want them and a move toward a cantonal system. Indeed, Switzerland remains one of the most important models for unity in diversity. After the fashioning of their new constitution in 1832 the Swiss managed to retain an interesting pluralism. Thus they turned their back on having a national university, preferring that the three main national cultures develop on their own lines.

Inner diversification should be accompanied by external steps toward federalism; for instance, the European Common Market. The great growth of foreign trade, moreover, including in this the development of multinational corporations, presents an opportunity to bind together what is separate. In all this the constructive use of nationalism is that it gives people a sense of identity in ways they do not sacrifice to homogenization, even when economic facts are bringing about convergences of interest. Ethnic and national pluralism should not be repressed, then. No doubt by gaining full cultural expression, nationalism will cease to have the bitter force it has so often possessed in the past. Federalism, cantonal arrangements, separate electoral roles, mechanisms for proportional equality between groups—all these and other devices become significant means of diminishing group hostilities and suspicions. Oddly enough, it is the tendency toward homogenization—often fostered by well-meaning liberals and rationalists—that can create disturbing threats to identity and to peace.

The best way, then, toward a more just and less bitter international and human order is by encouraging, not discouraging, the sense of group identity. We learn unity not so much by achieving the same customs as by recognizing diversities. In the long run, when that important sense of belonging is secure, we may come to transcend it.