

# Dispelling Nationalism as Immaculate Conception

Written by Jiun Bang

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## Dispelling Nationalism as Immaculate Conception

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JIUN BANG, MAY 13 2017

The longer one studies *nationalism*—the pursuit of a set of rights for a self-defined member of the nation, and that which often evokes an oppositional ‘Other’—the more one realizes that the concept is more instinctive than operational: everyone seems to immediately know what it means, but its mechanisms regularly fall prey to abstraction. That might be why it is so tempting to argue that ‘nationalism’ causes X, Y, and Z, or that ‘history’ is what fuels nationalism; yet, beneath the veneer of intuition, the anthropomorphism makes little sense, as history does not partake in demonstrations—*people* do. Without that specific link between the various channels of nationalism to its agents, and specification about how nationalism transitions from a consciousness to an action, nationalism remains at the level of Immaculate Conception: nationalist rhetoric somehow magically impregnates the thoughts of individuals to then produce behavioral change.

In following, my motivation is based on this inescapable feeling of disassociation as a result of leaving out the micro-foundations of how nationalism actually works. My main objective here is to outline a few questions that the existing nationalist discourse has difficulty in answering and then to offer an approach to nationalism that seeks to address some of these concerns. By offering a framework of commodification where nationalism is consumed and reproduced within a marketplace in the form of tangible goods and services, I am able to treat nationalism as a fluid process in identity formation that requires continuous human agency to maintain, rather than a collective bundle of floating sentiments that somehow always remain in the air until they self-combust into conflict.

### Three Questions on Existing Nationalist Discourse

The conventional approach to nationalism in political science and IR can be mapped out as if it were an electric circuit: ethnic cleavage, historic hatred, structural inequalities often represent the power source (‘batteries’), mass media, state education, and propaganda constitute the medium of dissemination (‘conductor’), while protest and outbreak of conflict indicate the observable activity or expression of that nationalism (‘light bulb’). Of the circuit, we have been most interested in the source and the expression. To be fair, this reflects a common approach to everyday life: for instance, we can identify what a car needs to get it started (fuel) and what the observable implications of fuel are (movement), but not so much the mechanisms of how that fuel gets converted into energy and the vehicular intricacies thereof. The risk though of sidelining discussions about the medium of nationalism for the source in the context of why and when we see conflict, is that it is extremely *limiting*. In fact, there are three specific questions that could be raised to demonstrate the limitations that I have in mind.

#### *Question 1) How is Nationalism Obtained AND Maintained?*

In the social sciences, there is a general fascination with causality and discovering the conditions and circumstances of how something has come into being; in the case of nationalism, this has meant a dual focus on the role of the past such as wars and collective memory in triggering nationalism as well as how nationalism itself may potentially cause further violence and conflict. To use Northeast Asia as an example (circumscribed to China, Taiwan, Japan, and the two Koreas), it has become relatively common to a) place ‘history’ as the cause of tensions and skittishness between states in the region, b) predict some militarized conflict on the near horizon due to such lingering animosities, and c) even hint (though rare) at excitable nationalistic qualities to certain states that evoke a kind of primordial cultural essentialism that is at odds with the rough consensus that nationalism has a socially-constructed component.

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Leaving aside for the moment the problem of treating 'historical grudges' as having human agency, the routine of blaming history for the ills of the now seems to be an attempt to get at the *origins* of a relationship. As such, we get a glimpse of what the identity is rooted in but not necessarily how that identity is maintained thereafter. Actually, the heavy emphasis on the initial acquisition of identity through historical consciousness accentuates the role of singular triggering events, war or otherwise. Not only does this bias our thinking of nationalism in terms of *events* that occur rather than a *practice* that is undertaken, it also stresses the idea that the exposure to nationalism is a one-off affair, so that once the 'light bulb' is lit, we no longer need 'batteries' to keep it going. This has important implications for the stickiness of nationalism, which is given its own section below.

Meanwhile, the prediction about impending conflict in Northeast Asia gives nationalism explanatory power, and fulfills the need for causal inference through empirical evaluation. In fact, in drawing that causal link between nationalism and conflict, a convenient indicator for the empirical expression of that nationalism has been demonstrations and protests: think, anti-Japanese protests in China in response to the escalation of its ongoing territorial dispute with Japan. If nationalism is a consciousness that resides in between the earlobes, it becomes important to address the question of how we know nationalism when we see it, and demonstrations have provided an answer. Notwithstanding, a problematic inference here is that the expressions then always signal a positive presence of nationalism and not lack thereof. But is it accurate to assume that my participation in a street protest correlates with a high level of nationalist identity? Or could it be that my participation is one of the ways in which I am attaining a nationalist identity? While demonstrations may be treated as indicators of nationalism, they can also serve as conduits or sites of where the exposure to nationalism occurs—especially after repeated exposure through sustained participation. This is why both the ability to specify the medium of dissemination and how identity is maintained are paramount to studies of nationalism. An account of nationalism that neglects these components is necessarily incomplete—we know where it begins (history) and how it could end (conflict), but with little detail in between.

## *Question 2) Does Nationalism have a 'half-life'?*

On an everyday basis, we know that whenever we flip on the light switch in a dark room, there is a continuous flow of electric current running through the circuit, even though we may choose to focus on our singular act of flipping the switch and our predominant interest in seeing the light go on. In a similar manner, not only have we been less concerned with how nationalism is continuously maintained as a practice or process, but also in how nationalism could be turned *off*. In fact, we have been so consumed by how the light bulb can be turned on that we have become accustomed to thinking that nationalism only works in one direction: *up* but not *down* (*on* but not *off*). As a result, there is a certain permanence to nationalism that makes that identity unambiguous, immutable, and irrevocable once charged. This gets to the question of the stickiness of nationalism and whether it has a *half-life*—a term often used in nuclear physics to describe the time required for elements like uranium or plutonium to survive radioactive decay and reduce to half its initial value.

So conscious or not, we often prefer to treat nationalism as something that escalates, but rarely (if at all) de-escalates. My argument is that we can better understand how nationalist identity is something that requires constant effort on the part of the individual to retain when it is viewed as a process rather than a singular event. Instead of assuming that the first contact with a nationalist narrative must be sticky enough to make an imprint that persists through time, the processual approach gives more fluidity to what happens after someone comes into contact with nationalist rhetoric; without constant consumption and momentum, it is just as plausible to see a waning/decaying of nationalism, not just its linear increase. There is no compelling reason for nationalism to be *afixture* rather than a *variable*, especially so when we consider the discourse on the possibility for identity to oscillate and be mediated by circumstances. If we approach nationalism as no longer a deterministic consciousness that is insensitive to time but rather a dynamic process that requires constant negotiation and momentum, we can finally admit that there is agency behind nationalism and that our task requires just as much effort on de-escalation as we have already spent on locating the cause of its escalation.

## *Question 3) Is Nationalism Top-Down or Bottom-Up?*

To be fair, we do have existing accounts in political science and IR that have identified the medium of nationalist

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dissemination. Where this has figured the most is in debates about top-down influences of the state and its role in inculcating the masses. The logic is that the state often resorts to channels such as mass media, state-run education campaigns (including school curricula and textbooks), and general propaganda to indoctrinate the public. Something similar could be said about the popular 'elite manipulation' strand of discourse, although they are typically much more vague about the specific medium of how the charismatic elites actually resort to the nationalist myths to sway the hearts and minds of a vulnerable public in their favor. (More nuanced accounts tend to also include religious and cultural symbols as expressed in poetry, song, and speech.) As is often the case with such top-down accounts of nationalism, the public is treated as a passive (if not naïve) group; the implicit assumption behind nationalist mobilization is that the public is relatively receptive and malleable rather than completely unbending.

On the other hand, there are also bottom-up arguments that do give more credence to the role of the masses. By bottom-up, I mean political movements especially in the context of anti-colonialism and self-determination that involved mass mobilization at the local level, as that of certain movements for independence in Africa and Asia after World War II. At this point, one has to wonder whether 1) we have operated under unreasonably strict boundaries for who counts as producers and consumers of nationalist rhetoric (mostly intellectuals, urban elites, and a 'public' en masse), and 2) the division of labor between producers and consumers have prevented a confluence of both popular and elite nationalism so that we see more *horizontal* rather than strictly *vertical* flows of dissemination.

The intuition that the state and the public may interact in crafting a nationalist discourse is not unfamiliar to works situated in regional studies and history, which readily require great attention to detail and contextual information at the micro-level. For instance, Freitag (1988) has examined localized experiences of nationalist dissemination within the context of South Asia. Gershoni (2005: 25) has also highlighted our tendency to neglect how the receptivity to nationalist ideas work in the case of the "subaltern socioeconomic strata" that includes the lower middle class, and that we are uninformed about "the modes in which women, the poor, and the illiterate—constituting the overwhelming majority of the societies in question [in the case of the Middle East]—reacted to the radicalized upper middle stratum's struggle against the Westernized 'ancien régime.'" To tie this back to the specification of mechanisms and channels of nationalism—the who *and* the how—Schmidt (2005: 985) has argued in her assessment of Guinea that "while some indigenous cultural practices and images were co-opted by elites and presented to the populace, the people themselves brought others to the movement," and that "the masses were not simply an "audience" for elite-inspired nationalism, nor the "transmitters" of a message formulated for them...Rather, people without formal education created these devices [such as songs and slogans] to communicate among themselves, to transmit their own messages to the elites, and to interpret elite messages in terms meaningful to themselves." As if to echo the sentiment about nationalism going both ways of escalation and de-escalation, there needs to be a consideration for a two-way directionality of nationalist discourse beyond a binary top-down or bottom-up model.

## Embedding Nationalism within the Marketplace

In synthesizing what has been said so far, an approach to nationalism that I have in mind would capture nationalism as: a) a process or practice that needs constant momentum in the form of human agency to maintain; b) an everyday practice that resides at the level of 'ordinary' citizens and; c) a multidirectional process that requires elite-public interaction. In this spirit, I offer one potential framework that fulfills such requirements—*commodification of nationalism*, or the process of transforming nationalist sentiment into goods and services, and how nationalism can then be thought of as a consumption activity that waxes and wanes to influence overall resonance of nationalist identity at any given time. A few empirical examples that I have covered in my own work involve products that invoke nationalism surrounding territorial sovereignty, such as food, drinks, and apparel that carry messages regarding Dokdo/Takeshima—an ongoing dispute between South Korea and Japan.

Once we accept that tangible goods may come to have social content, the market can represent a platform for new forms of human interaction rather than a mere site for commodity exchange. One such possibility is for the market to facilitate a new space for political engagement, so that we may think about consumption as "a site of cognitive value," that can be "good for thinking and acting in a meaningful way that renews social life," (Canclini, 2001: 47). Others have examined the commodification of ethnic identity—*ethnopreneurialism*—in the global market place and how culture commodified means more than simply an alienation of its producers, but rather, an "open-ended dialectic

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in which, under the impress of the market, human subjects and cultural objects produce, reproduce, and refashion each other," (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 28-29). In short, tangible goods are able to contain social content that make them excellent vehicles for nationalism.

In following, there are several advantages to the commodification framework. The first is that there is enough existing interdisciplinary research on consumerism and citizenship to allow the integration of nationalism with economics so that we may talk about how the market affords the space for civil society *and* political consumerism and/or activism. Actually, the blurring of boundaries between the commercial and political, or capitalism and nationalism, enhances flexibility in thinking about who the producers and consumers of nationalism are. Once relegated to being passive consumers in the elite manipulation discourse, the public is now an active producer of nationalism by becoming entrepreneurs in the commercial sphere. In the case of South Korea and Japan, I have been able to gauge the rough extent of commodification by examining the number of existing trademarks that incorporate the name of the disputed territory in their business title or logo. This is an added advantage of material goods that makes quantification a little easier compared to say, collective memory or historical animosity where measurement is a challenge. (Perhaps someday, we will be privy to a 'neuroscience of nationalism' that relies on advanced technology to capture emotions attached to nationalism.)

A quick glance at the trademarks shows that the actors that apply for them range from not only individuals and companies but also sub-national governments. This gets to the second advantage of the commodification framework and its ability to capture a more *horizontal* relationship between elites and the public. In fact, a deeper qualitative look at some of these agents reveals a more *interactive* process than a hierarchical one: while some entrepreneurs are able to receive partial government funding for their nationalist products, a part of their revenue then end up as proceeds to non-governmental organizations that work on the nationalist cause. At the same time, it would be misleading to think that the state takes a complete backseat to the efforts at commodification by commercial actors. When one examines the number of applications for trademarks that were *rejected*, it becomes clear that the central government still acts as an overall gatekeeper; hence, rather than the state quietly receding into the background as classic theories of neoliberalism or even globalization would have it, this is a good example of the nation-state negotiating new coalitions with existing structures.

Finally, the commodification framework avoids taking the appeal of nationalism for granted. What is it about nationalism that really grabs people? It is often the case that some pre-existing ethnic cleavage and conflict makes the populace vulnerable and hence, open to manipulation through nationalist rhetoric by the elites. In contrast, commodification presumes that individuals are proactive and can be incentivized in a positive way to partake in consuming and producing nationalism; that the elements of value-creation or profits provide an added motivation to get into the business in the first place. It is important to briefly note that 'value-creation' here goes beyond the narrow definition of simply profits—it may include a sense of purpose that typically accompanies sentiments tied to a collective group as that of nationalism. To an extent then, capitalism must be moderated by nationalism, which no longer conforms to a standard understanding where capital or money reigns supreme. Subsequently, this heralds the rise of the *Homo Faber*, or one who crafts his or her own citizenship through entrepreneurship.

## Concluding Remarks

I started out by mapping the existing nationalist discourse to an electric circuit, wherein elements like historical animosity and cross-cutting ethnic lines represent the power source, channels such as mass media or state-run education campaigns constitute the conductor, and outbreak of conflict indicate the observable expression of nationalism or the light bulb. Even though logic would suggest that every component on a typical circuit must be connected in order for the energy to flow uninterrupted and for us to understand how nationalism functions, we know comparatively little about the specific channels or paths in which nationalism works; hence, the charge that at times, it would seem that the way that nationalism operates is almost like Immaculate Conception.

Similarly, we have been preoccupied with seeing the light come on or when nationalism erupts into conflict, rather than if and how we can turn that light *off*. If nationalism is fundamentally rooted in identity and identity itself is not irrevocable, there is no compelling reason for nationalism to be only obtained through a singular action that requires

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no further maintenance through multiple exposure to nationalist discourse. Instead of simply identifying the origins of nationalism then, there needs to be an equal treatment of how nationalism is maintained as a practice. To that end, one idea is the following: in addition to questions about why individuals participate in demonstrations and movements, it would help to know what people actually do *before* and *after* the moment of the protest—for instance, where do they go and who do they interact with?

My suggestion regarding the commodification framework is only one of many possible approaches to nationalism as a practice. By positing that nationalism can be consumed through goods and services that embody nationalist messages and that individuals themselves may become entrepreneurs of such commercial activity, nationalism no longer creates such a rigid division of labor between *who does what* in the nationalist narrative, c.f.) top-down vs. bottom-up. At the same time, just as consumption waxes and wanes, so too does nationalism. In the end, the merging of politics and economics or nationalism and capitalism provides implications for how we think about citizenship and consumerism and what role money plays in issues of state identity.

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