

What Is Nationalism? A Nation? A Nationalist?

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, NOV 16 2018

In 1882, Ernest Renan addressed this question in his speech, made famous to the U.S. audience by Benedict Anderson and others, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” or “What is a nation?” In this lecture, Renan famously stated that a nation is a “soul” or “spiritual principle” in which what we choose to remember in common and what we choose to forget in common are the paramount defining factors. He also explained that Race, Language, Religion, Community of Interests, and Geography were ways that Europeans at the time (and historically) often thought about the nation and what it holds as a common, unifying factor. He explained why each of these factors is limited in its ability to unify and keep together the people(s) of a nation.

Is nationalism inherently racist? No. A nation, according to Benedict Anderson, is a “spiritual unity.” It is a tendency of cultural imagination to conceive of one’s self as part of a larger whole of people whom one will never, personally, meet. For Anderson, it is enabled, historically, by the widespread existence of print media and the increasingly widespread occurrence of reading (initially, newspapers). It almost always masks prior internal differences and conflicts even in its more grassroots and organic forms, as a necessity in order to enable us to “imagine” ourselves as sharing something significant in common.

While nationalism is decidedly not racist, inherently, it has, at times, been associated with extreme ethno-nationalism, as in the cases of Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. In such cases, it has usually been associated with fascist policies in which opposition, defined by racial or other categories, is singled out for eradication, physical and/or other forms of extreme oppression.

Nationalism, therefore, holds within it the possibility of racist, ethnocentric, or culture-centric (often center versus periphery, or urban versus rural) ends. Indeed, in its origins as a modern idea in Europe, nationalism typically associated a “nation” with an ethnic group. “The nation” may come to be associated with the language and culture of the central capital city, and it may be associated with the intentional or enforced (to various degrees of violence) eradication of local languages and overt cultural forms that would strongly distinguish local peoples from the “high culture” of the center. (Such a point brings us full circle to the critiques of Pierre Bourdieu regarding the formation of Western notions of high culture more broadly.) As Ernest Gellner points out, educational “reforms” are often, historically, associated with these efforts to force linguistic and cultural practices, as well as specific historical narratives, on what were previously diverse peoples (and narratives) within an existing realm. In the European context, such a realm was most likely empire, monarchy, or principality prior to the onset of the nation-state.

Nationalism in its late-modern form is an idea that emerges, then, from Europe and is characteristically associated with the nation-state. The nation-state does not become predominant, globally speaking, until sometime after World War I.

Nationalism does not only have a modern form, however. According to some scholars, including Anthony Smith, the sort of solidarity found in modern nationalism can also be found in primordial identities that far predate the modern period and may even go back into the Ancient period. Such identities may not be associated with states, or even with polities.

Biblical usage of the word עַם (“people” or “nation”) would be an example of such an identity.

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Likewise, there is scholarly disagreement on whether the American Revolution should be categorized as a “national” revolution, since it involved a purely civic notion of common identity and solidarity rather than one formed upon ethnicity, language, religion, or other factors usually associated with the concept of nationalism, particularly in that period. Important scholars such as Liah Greenfeld, nonetheless, do associate the American Revolution with nationalism even in that period, and certainly since.

Nationalism in the late-modern period is inherently associated with *differentiation* in the sense that nation-states, by definition, differentiate rules, laws, rights, and obligations by nation-state, by citizenship, and by national territorial boundaries.

It would be difficult to support the notion that nationalism is inherently associated with (or causal in regard to) racism. That said, *inclusion* frequently is an issue of contestation within nation-states, cross-nationally; issues of inclusion that arise in a given national context may relate to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, rural/urban divides, etc. In most cases, these are issues not caused by nationalism, per se. Moreover, since the nation-state has often been associated with *democratic* political systems, it is also often associated precisely with those political institutions that allow for the meaningful debates that *create* inclusion for varied peoples within the nation-state. And herein lies the rub with a pure critique of the “nation” as the primary organizing framework for the global political order, increasingly and approximately, since the end of World War I.

I make this defense of the “nation” as someone who, in the ideal, would ultimately prefer a world based upon the Silk Route in which the more camels, horses, and mules and the fewer enclosures between peoples, globally speaking, the better. Such a utopia does not appear, at present moment, close to achieving. And, the institutions at hand are observably equal to the task of ensuring inclusion, at the national level, all the while using the nation-state to defend the rights of one segment of the world population at a time at the international level. The problem is not formal institutions or theory but, rather, ensuring that practices on the ground correspond with them both.

The imperial alternative appears to me far less appealing. There are significant transaction costs, in lives and in freedoms, associated with experimenting with untried (or previously failed) political orders. In principle, the nation-state is an *institutional means* precisely to *democratize the international system*. It allows peoples, by region and sub-region, to be represented by peoples closer to them materially, culturally, in terms of institutional models, and otherwise. A nationalist, then, is someone who believes that the interests of segments of the world are better represented in chunks smaller than continents or empires in an admittedly imperfect world.

About the author:

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