Is the Nationalist Ideal still at the Heart of Politics in the 21st Century?

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"*Nationalism*", asserts Fred Halliday, "*has been one of the formative processes of the modern world* "[1]and many argue that nationalist ideology continues to play an important part in the political discourse and decisions of the developed and developing world. In the dialogue of this essay I will; briefly define the 'nationalist ideal' and the complications such a definition raises; examine the nature of contemporary nationalism and whether this can be ascribed as 'new nationalism'; ascertain the impact that modernity and globalisation has on the nationalist ideal; and present a discussion on the relevance of nationalism in the conduct of politics in the United States, with particular focus upon the internationalist scope of American nationalism and the need to securitize subjectivity in times of uncertainty and existential anxiety.

I believe that while globalisation promotes factors that oppose nationalism, it concurrently accentuates the inherent psychological necessity of a secure personal and cultural identity (in response to perceived 'fears' brought about by globalisation) and therefore reaffirms the longevity of the nationalist ideal in the 21st century.

Reaching a definitive explanation of nationalism is heavily problematic, for as Andrew Heyword suggests, "*immense controversy surrounds the political character of nationalism* " and the guise nationalism obtains at any given time is reliant on the "*political ideals of those who espouse it* "[2]. Simplistically, nationalism is the ideology that nations (a distinguishable community of individuals with a common culture, history, tradition or language) are entitled to self-determination[3]. However, I argue that notions of the nationalist ideal have – in reaction to globalisation – expanded beyond this limited meaning to include concepts of psychological identity, security / stability in the face of outside 'threats', the importance of the beliefs and normative principles of a political community and are intrinsically linked to issues of race and gender.

There are many opposing perspectives of contemporary trends of nationalist ideology, critically between proponents of the modernist paradigm and more history-centric perennialists. Mary Kaldor argues that nationalism in the 21st century has evolved to a point where she labels it 'new nationalism' and distinguishes it primarily from nationalist ideals of the past in that it is predominantly regressive, and *'will contribute to a wild, anarchic form of globalisation, characterised by violence and inequality*"[4]. Her argument is underpinned on the assertion that contemporary nationalism is a direct response to globalisation, and therefore while some ideologies are reformist – offering a *'policy prescription for… ways in which individuals are expected to be able to benefit from globalisation* " – nationalism appeals to an imagined past and intends to reverse at-least some aspects of the current changes, including potential positive reforms. Furthermore, Kaldor recognises that nationalism is unlikely to go into decline in the immediate future, but rather – as Smith argues – globalisation has not brought about a decline in the nation-state, but a change in its function from traditional economic and military mindsets towards the *'social and cultural spheres, and from external sovereignty to internal domestic control*"[5]. Kaldor furthers Smith's argument, claiming that the loss in external sovereignty and the declining frequency of war has led (in the developed world) to another new form of nationalism; 'spectacle nationalism'. Spectacle nationalism requires only passive participation – Kaldor cites waving flags for Her Majesty the Queen's Jubilee celebrations as one example – and consequently this 'official ideology' is simply another form of legitimising existing states[6], and the capacity to mobilise the population to active participation (paying tax, going to war) is greatly diminished. But this is not the intent of this form of the nationalist

ideal; it is different from 'new nationalism' that is "*bred in conditions of insecurity and violence*" and "*is exclusive… it excludes others of a different nationalist, and has much in common with religious fundamentalism, the insistence that religious doctrines be followed rigidly and imposed on others*". I agree with Kaldor's testimony that the new active participatory forms of nationalism have developed precisely as a reaction to globalisation; they are "*closely connected to contemporary structural conditions*", and have been invented or constructed in the post-Cold War period. The resurgence of nationalism in many parts of the globe is a response to modernity, a response to the insecurity and fear of dramatic change, and thus Smith and Kaldor purport that these factors increase the individual's vulnerability to exclusive ideologies. The present nationalist ideal is a product of the 21st century, and therefore continues to play a crucial role in 21stcentury politics.

The terrorists attacks of September 11th 2001 have had the most enduring affect on the shaping of domestic and international politics in the 21st century, particularly for the United States and its continuing 'War on Terror'. Crucially, Paul McCartney proposes that "*enduring nationalist themes provided the basic structure in which Americans organized their comprehension of and reaction to the terrorist attacks*"[7]and by extension one can assume that these nationalist ideals transcended popular sentiment to be expressed in US political policy. McCartney supports this view, claiming that "*National identity and foreign policy are intimately connected in the United States*"[8]. However, instances of American nationalistic ideals flow throughout the history of the United States and continue to be consistently and repeatedly invoked by Presidents and statesmen to justify US political policies, indeed, "*the strongest and most meaningful statements regarding American national identity have come from presidents during wartime*"[9]. In President Bush's major speeches concerning the war in Iraq he utilises recurring nationalist imagery, linking September 11th with Iraq and therefore "*reinforcing in the Americans' minds a protean connection between the two*"[10]. Vamik Volkan proposes that powerful events in the collective history of a nation that are invoked and actively remembered – a "*chosen trauma*"[11]– are psychological manifestations of nationalism brought about by a human desire to pinpoint one's identity, and to explain future traumas experienced by the nation. The Japanese strike at Pearl Harbour was immediately seized upon by some US politicians in an attempt to comprehend the World Trade Centre attacks, just as September 11th is now popularly invoked as an opening to comprehend hostility towards the United States, or as justification for more extreme American foreign policy. As Catarina Kinnvall explains, "*a chosen trauma is often used to interpret new traumas*"[12].

A chosen trauma brings with it "*powerful experiences of loss and feelings of humiliation, vengeance, and hatred*" and can be observed in most contemporary expressions of nationalism. Not only does the United States remember catastrophic incidents in its history to justify present actions, but Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda refer to the medieval Crusades by Christian forces against Islam as a both an historical evidence of present Western attitudes, and as justification for their own terrorist actions. Furthermore, Volkan identifies that "*chosen glories*"[13]can serve in the opposite capacity to traumas, and are remembered in order to bolster a nation's self esteem. Once more, America and bin Laden's form of 'global Islam' have exploited historical glories in attempts to rally popular sentiment to their new cause:

- At West Point, President Bush remarked "*the war on terror will require resolve and patience [and] firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War [where] moral clarity was essential to our victory… Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, in every place*". Moreover, remarks indicating the timelessness of an imperative is a common trait of nationalism; the combination of established values with a nation's heritage permits one to trace an ideological lineage and "*to provide a guide for future actions*"[14].
- In an interview with Al-Jazeera correspondent Tayseer Alouni, bin Laden asserted that "*Our goal is for our nation to unite in the face of the Christian crusade… Muslims have never faced anything bigger than this… The original crusade brought Richard from Britain, Louis from France, and Barbarus from Germany. Today the crusading countries rushed as soon as Bush raised the cross*". The reference to the Crusades can serve as both a chosen trauma and a chosen glory; for bin Laden associates himself Saladin and his successful capture and control of Jerusalem in 1187, but the Crusades of the 12th century also marked invasion, defeat and occupation for the Muslim population in the Middle East.

Furthermore, President Bush's National Security Strategy (NSS) frequently espouses moralistic and nationalistic

language to justify – in terms of interests and normative values – the invasion of Iraq and future US 'preventative' action:

Embodying lessons from our past… the national security strategy of the United States must start from these core beliefs and look outward for possibilities to expand liberty.

An established political and cultural history is a recognised key component of successful nationalist ideology. Allusions to American history are similarly made in political spheres to justify a course of action or explain a current of thought. President Bush has made numerous such statements in official addresses:

History has called us to these responsibilities… America has always had a special mission to defend justice and advance freedom around the world.

In addition, in the President's 2002 UN speech he declared that "*By heritage and by choice, the United States will make that stand*" for security and the rights of mankind.

A characteristic of wider contemporary nationalism is that it is transnational; American nationalism surpasses even this. McCartney argues that the US has always maintained "*a sweeping identification with the whole of humanity*" and uses this as a "*basis for claiming its righteous entitlement to lead the world*"[15]. In a period of increased globalisation – arguably 'Westernisation' – the perceived national identity of the world's only superpower is of paramount importance. Conceived of as a 'melting pot' of traditional ethnic and cultural divides, the United States does not have the traditional nationalistic tendencies prevalent in Europe or the Middle East – there is no common US ethnicity – and therefore American national identity has been established on normative systems of belief and values, which has consequently imparted the belief that American principles are shared by all of humanity. Therefore, McCartney proposes, the atypical expression of US nationalism is an intent to change the world "*to suit American interests by making it more consistent with American values*"[16].

However, Kaldor argues that "*nationalism will only persist to the extent that individuals, movements, and groups choose to be nationalist*" and therefore we can conclude that the moralistic language typified in official responses to the September 11th attacks and the subsequent 'War on Terror' must be (or have been) what the American people wanted to hear, even if "*the need for American statesmen to use ideologically charged nationalistic language remains one of the tragic ironies of American politics*"[17]. Therefore, I argue, the resurgence of nationalist thought in the face of globalisation is primarily a subconscious reaction built from the need to securitize subjectivity (crudely; a security of one's own thoughts and self-identity) in times of uncertainty and existential anxiety. Kaldor suggests that it is in "situations of pervasive insecurity that fear and hatred, passion and prejudice, are more likely to come to dominate political choices" and hence, "*membership in nationalist or religious groups offers meaning, a sense of historical relevance, and also adventure*"[18]. Globalisation is one such trend that can conjure individual feelings of insecurity and fear and therefore lead to an increase in nationalist ideologies. Baylis and Smith identify eight primary globalising processes that promote nationalism: a dislike of alien cultures; hostility to immigration; fears of unemployment; a loss of economic control to foreign investors; hostility to the global media; fears of terrorism and subversion; a resentment at supranational institutions; and the attraction of secession[19]. Consequently, as an individual feels vulnerable because of the processes of a closely interlinked and rapidly changing world they invariably experience existential anxiety and search for ways in which to reaffirm their threatened self-identity. Nationalism provides an avenue for the individual to securitize subjectivity and therefore reinforce their self-identity with a wider national community because nationalism supplies "*particularly powerful stories and beliefs [with an] ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers. They do this by being portrayed as resting on solid ground, as being true, thus creating a sense that the world really is what it appears to be* "[20]. As the 21st century is currently defined by an intense period of globalisation, when individuals are more closely intertwined than ever before and transformative processes are occurring rapidly, people are drawn to nationalist ideals as a counter to a sense of psychological instability.

There is little doubt that globalisation challenges our definitions of who we are and where we come from, and this is unlikely to change within the first decades of the 21st century. Therefore, nationalist ideals that provide a stable basis

for individual and collective self-identity, with an arsenal of cultural, political, military and even academic history to support them, will continue to be at the very heart of the political process in the 21st century. America and the Middle East have seen a particularly powerful and well-publicised resurgence of nationalist ideology – both in regards to normative superiority or responsibilities, and the basic right to self-determination without foreign influence – but Western Europe has also seen a reinvention of nationalism (the UK Independence Party in Britain or Le Pen's National Front party in France). One is left to wonder if the current wave of nationalism testifies to the ideologies enduring nature; if the nationalist ideal fulfils an intrinsic human necessity.

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[6]'Nationalism and Globalisation': 168.

[7]McCartney, P. (2004) 'American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War'*Political Science Quarterly* 19 (3): 400.

[8]*Ibid*.

[9]*Ibid*: 408.

[10]*Ibid*: 419.

[11]Volkan, V. (1997) Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism. Boulder: Westview: 36

[12]Kinnvall, C. (2004) 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security'. *Political Psychology* 25 (5): 755.

[13]'Bloodlines': 81.

[14]'Globalization and Religious Nationalism': 756.

[15]'American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy': 400.

[16]*Ibid*.

[17]*Ibid: 409.*

[18]'Nationalism and Globalization': 169.

[19]'Nationalism'. In *TheGlobalization of World Politics*: 442.

[20]'Globalization and Religious Nationalism': 742.

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