

Nationalism is Not a Dirty Word

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Commentary

In recent times, in both academic publications and in the media more generally, there has been a notable tendency to depreciate nationalism and in some cases the very idea of the nation. In the media, there is the constant linking of so-called 'right-wing extremism' and nationalism. Both are presented as deplorable current trends. This 'right-wing extremism' can encompass developments as widely separated, and as popularly supported, as the electoral win of Donald Trump, the support for Marine Le Pen in France, the Modi government in India, or the movement for Brexit in the UK. In media commentary nationalism is frequently treated as the equivalent of racism. One of the most egregious examples of this is the widespread use in the media of the term 'white nationalism.' This is used as a synonym for racism. In academia, the disparagement of nationalism was in the past most often associated with left wing writers; but increasingly it be part of the ideological commitments of what Tariq Ali [1] has called the 'extreme centre,' identified with the political and economic agendas of neoliberalism and globalisation. In academic work, the emphasis has been on the constructed nature of nationalism, with the implication of artificiality; in addition, the thoroughgoing and relentless analysis of national myths has— at the very least— implied that they are false.

In 2006 the political philosopher Roger Scruton noted that lately nationalism and nations had been under threat in the battle of ideas: 'everywhere the idea of the nation is under attack— either despised as an atavistic form of social unity, or even condemned as a cause of war and conflict' [2]. In the decade since then the nation and nationalism have been even further in retreat. These trends ignore and dismiss the affective loyalties and identities that people all over the globe feel. Nationalism is a multidimensional social phenomenon reflected in communal identification with one's nation. National myths and nationalist feelings of identification with a national community are deeply rooted within popular cultures. The suggestion then is that such affective ties, what people feel, is some sort of false consciousness. The implication is that these feelings have been artificially created, the result of manipulation or perhaps of ignorance.

I would argue that human beings have a need for a sense of belonging and community, and a powerful desire for participation in and enjoyment of a shared culture. These needs can be met at the level of family, friendships, neighbourhoods, or even a local football club, up to the level of a village, a region, a nation, or the international community. These various attachments and allegiances need not be in conflict. Identities are not exclusive but multiple, as postmodern theorists have underlined. There is no necessary contradiction between being a strong patriot for one's nation and identifying oneself as a member of an international community. Instead it is arguable that in a psychological sense these allegiances and emotional ties build upon each other.

It is out of such affective relationships and allegiances that values and moral commitments develop. In 2004 one of the world's most respected sociologists and public intellectuals, Jurgen Habermas, commented that we should 'treat with care all cultural sources on which the normative consciousness and solidarity of citizens draw' [3]. At the time Habermas was referring principally to religion as such a cultural resource, but I would like to add that national loyalties can also contribute to the moral consciousness of citizens as well as creating a sense of community solidarity. National myths can inspire people to put certain values or virtues into practice when they become convinced that their nation shares those values and characteristics. Plato was one of the first to point out that myths can mould the conduct of human beings and educate them so that they are inclined to do what is right. Habermas later wrote of the current problem that beliefs in reason, science and the procedural rationality of the liberal state cannot by themselves induce people to act in virtuous as opposed to self-interested ways; nor can they offer 'collectively binding ideals' [4]. To overcome these problems Habermas suggested the need for 'constitutional patriotism,' an adherence to the values and policies of the liberal state; however, that was a highly intellectualised concept, lacking the heartfelt attachments of ordinary everyday patriotism. By securing people's emotional adherence, patriotism and national myths can influence behaviour in morally appropriate ways.

The fact is that in the current political configuration diminishing nationalism and the nation suits the agenda of globalisation and neoliberalism, movements dominated by US corporate interests and hugely to their profit. It is linked to the assumption that globalisation is inevitable and irresistible. This is often the subtext of condemnations of Trump, Le Pen and Brexit. More broadly, opposition to globalisation is made the equivalent of racism. Yet a resurgence of nationalism as a political movement, especially in the former colonised countries which make up more than half the globe, would be a serious challenge to the interests of the multinational corporations (overwhelmingly US economic interests). As a political ideology, nationalism is oriented towards gaining and maintaining self-governance or full sovereignty over a territory of historical significance to the group. A revitalisation of nationalism would be just as inconvenient for the current forces of globalisation as the previous mid-twentieth-century upsurge of nationalism was for Western imperialism.

This argument is not meant to be a wholesale exoneration of nationalism or to imply that there are not dangers if nationalism is taken to excess or is misdirected. There is no human ideology that is not capable of having dangerous consequences if it is not balanced with other value commitments. But lately the public discourse has got out of balance in its exaggerated denigration of nationalism, and this comment is intended to suggest that it is time for a rethinking of these issues.

References

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