

## NATIONALISM AND THE PROBLEM WITH -ISMS

The problem with trying to analyze the term nationalism starts with the fact that it ends in -ism. Most terms that refer to -isms are abstractions that an academic or political group has invented as its preserve. Whoever wishes to argue about the meaning of the term has to pass through the group that coined the term and asserts ownership. If they invented the term then they are largely in control of its meaning, even after it spreads to other groups.

The second problem with terms that end in -ism is that they are built from ordinary, concrete terms whose meanings may go back centuries. Any debate that pits two -isms against one another will go nowhere. But if people are willing to start from and emphasize the adjective or noun from which the -ism is abstracted there can be progress. To use this last word for an example, a debate between progressivism vs traditionalism is useless. But an examination of the terms progress and tradition might uncover some common ground.

The term nation is not crystal clear in meaning but it is much more concrete in its reference than the term nationalism. "Nation" comes from the Latin word for birth. The word nation claims that a group of people is related by birth. Thus, a nation is thought to be composed of, if not brothers and sisters, then at least cousins. Norman Cousins (no pun intended) once made the claim that everybody on earth was at least a fiftieth cousin. Even if the number is higher than fifty, it is clear that without necessarily believing in an Adam and Eve, all humans are of the same nation or race.

The fact that all humans are cousins led the great humanist Erasmus to ask why don't we transfer the loyalty that people feel for their country to the whole earth. His question has continued to be asked during the six centuries since then. Nationalists might dismiss that question as silly and naïve. They assume we could never feel a loyalty to all people. I suspect that the unity of all the human cousins will only become apparent after the Earth has been invaded by Mars. Then someone at a planetary meeting might turn to another participant and say: "So you're an earthling? So am I."

The origin of the family as a unit built around parent, child, and grandchild extending outward to a few relatives is easy to understand. But how did the nation arise as a unit of division larger than family, clan, or tribe? The immediate basis for dividing people into "my people" and other people is the language they speak. Without a common language it is difficult to share life's joys and sorrows with another person. The origin of language itself is mysterious but when a small number of people were widely scattered across the earth, they each developed the human capacity for language in their own way.

Groups that got political power were able to impose their particular way of speaking on others. An old saying is that a language is a dialect that had an army and a navy. That process finally led to a "lingua franca" in the 19th century when a need was felt for a single language that could be used around the world. As the phrase indicates, French was thought to be the best choice for a language of international diplomacy and business. By that time other languages than French were so well established that no one proposed their replacement with French. However, there have

been repeated attempts since the 17<sup>th</sup> century by young mathematicians, to create a universal language; all attempts have failed.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, English largely triumphed in being what was still illogically called the “lingua franca.” The key moment was the requirement that all the flight towers in the world had to use English. The last outpost of resistance to that requirement was – not surprisingly – France. English has penetrated further than any previous language but the United States is likely wrong in expecting that everyone will eventually speak English and that US people will have a good reason for knowing only one language. If one language does triumph in the future that language might be Chinese not English.

The equation of a nation with any group that has a common dialect or language means that there are thousands of nations; no one is sure how many. Woodrow Wilson, having asserted that every people has a right to self-determination, later testified before Congress that he had had no idea what he was saying; that is, he had no suspicion that there were thousands of groups that called themselves a nation. The mess created by Wilson did not stop Franklin Roosevelt and (reluctantly) Winston Churchill in 1940 from making much the same promise in the Atlantic Charter with similar messy results.

The relation between nation and state is a big part of the problem with what nationalism means. A state is a governing unit that has exclusive control over a particular territory. Wilson supported a League of Nations and Roosevelt chose the name United Nations. What they actually formed, however, was not a League or Union of nations but of states. The organization that Roosevelt named the United Nations should logically be called the United States; I do not think Roosevelt considered that name. There is no ambiguity about the basis of UN membership. At the time of its founding in the 1940s, there were about fifty states in the world; now there about 200 units that are recognized as states. Frequently, there are references to “nation-state” which assumes a congruence of one nation and one state but that is now very much at issue.

The most complicated arrangement of nation and state is the country with the name “The United States of America.” The Constitutional Convention in 1787 could not agree on a name for the new union so they adopted a name from the title of the 1776 document: “A unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” They dropped the “thirteen” and capitalized the U. That stand-in for a name was a cover up for all the problems of uniting thirteen states. Instead of the founders creating a name for this new state, they left the name state to the components of the federation. Until the US civil war (which in much of the south is still called “the war between the states”) people generally felt primary loyalty to their state rather than to the federation of states. Even today many people have their primary loyalty to their state; they profess belief in “America” while being alienated from the United States and its government.

The other complication with the United States of America is that it was never a single nation. From early in the seventeenth century there was a mixture of European immigrants in the northern part of the American continent. The English language which was borrowed from the mother country became the most important element for the union of colonies that became states.

A second element besides language that was important for a nation was religion. A nation needed to have one religion or at least one dominant religion. The US Constitution proscribed an official national religion; it provided little guidance for the government's dealing with religion. The Protestant religion became the country's unofficial religion until the middle of the twentieth century. By the 1940s the Roman Catholic Church had become a political force and the Supreme Court introduced a new language, that of the separation of church and state. This European language has never made sense in the US with its fifty states and several hundred religions that are not churches.

It is regularly pointed out that one cannot be a citizen of the world; less often is it noted that one cannot be a citizen of a nation. Citizenship is to one of the two hundred states of the world. In many states there is a problem that several nations were forced together by colonial powers to form one state, A citizen of such a state may be loyal to the nation but not to the state. As a fitting reaction today, some states that were the colonizers (France, England, the Netherlands) now find themselves with immigrants that have a different culture and language and form another nation within states that had been "nation-states."

"Nationalism" gets its meaning from what it is opposed to. The most recent candidate is "globalism," a term that barely existed until the 1980s. Donald Trump and many other people who are unfamiliar with the long history of nationalism assume the choice to be nationalism or globalism. One complication, however, is that globalism is used both to indicate a fact that all the peoples of the earth are interconnected and it is also used for economic and political theories that emphasize that fact. A person might acknowledge the first meaning of globalism while disagreeing with a particular theory of globalism.

Yoram Hazony's recent book, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, offers a second candidate as the opposite of nationalism: "imperialism." The author claims that "globalism" is a cover up for imperialism as the only alternative to nationalism. Either the nation is the best and ultimate form of human grouping in the world or the ideal is a world government. Hazony disdains the UN. He takes particular aim at the European Union for trying to dissolve the nations of Europe. He argues that Hitler is mistakenly called a nationalist when in fact he was an imperialist intent on world domination. Hazony sees the most obvious imperialism today in the United States of America which over the past 70 years has tried to establish a world order under its benevolent control.

A neglected term that contrasts with "nationalism" is "internationalism." Like globalism, internationalism can refer to a fact or to theories of how nations interact. The advantage over globalism (or imperialism) is that it recognizes the nation or state as the basic unit of loyalty while also recognizing that nations today necessarily interact. It is remarkable that it was not until 1791 that the word "international" was coined by Jeremy Bentham. Before that there was no word to describe the interaction of nations or states. Until World War II there was not much interest in international law. Since then there has been increasing recognition that the world has to have an order based either on dictatorial powers or international laws.

There is often ridicule of international law, especially in the United States. In the 1940s the United States led the way in the formation of the United Nations and the Declaration of Human

Rights, a cornerstone of international law. Since then, the record of the US has been spotty in upholding human rights and multi-state treaties. I taught a course for fifteen years at NYU called “international ethics.” People would regularly say to me in a sarcastic tone of voice: “Isn’t that an oxymoron?” To which I would reply: Perhaps it is. Or perhaps it is one of the most important questions in the world today.

In his 1994 book, *Nationalism and the State*, John Breuilly describes nationalism as opposition to the state. That seems to be the case in Kurdish opposition to the state of Turkey, or Basque opposition to the Spanish government. However, it is also relevant to the United States of America where people regularly refer to their “nation.” When they refer to their state they usually mean one of the fifty units. Their opposition is to the state that is confusedly called the United States. In this meaning of nationalism it is bizarre for the president, who is the head of state, to proclaim himself a nationalist. But there is some logic to his claim. The movement he has led, under the mythical meaning of “America,” is opposed to the state of the United States, its government, and its laws.

There is also some logic for far right groups in the United States to combine the terms white and nationalism. The movement is aimed at the United States and its government. A nationalist movement in the United States would be difficult to organize except by using race as the defining factor. An “American nation” which consists of people from around the globe is difficult to imagine. It is simpler to imagine all white people as related. In 1790 an American was defined as “a free white person.”

What is the best case to be made for nationalism? One has to start from a state imagined as one nation or a union of nations. In discussions of how states interact with each other, a key term is “national interest.” It is routinely asserted that nations act to serve their national interest. The actual situation is that states have many interests; they interact with other states while trying to balance diverse national and other interests within themselves. States have some interests which are in competition with other states. States also have interests that overlap the interests of other states; for example, there are overlapping interests in environmental concerns for clean air, drinkable water and adequate food. There are also overlapping concerns for nuclear weapons which are of no practical use except for threats of unimaginable destruction, something that is of interest to every state.

Patriotism is an older word than nationalism with a less contentious meaning. It simply means love for or loyalty to one’s country. Loyalty to one’s native land does not imply disrespect for or hatred of other peoples. In fact, a test of true patriotism is that a love for one’s place – the physical land, the people and their history – is shown by respecting the loyalty that other people have for their place. The challenge for any self-proclaimed nationalist is to affirm the interests of one’s own nation or state in a way that helps one’s allies and in addition does not attack the most basic human interests of one’s adversaries.