

NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY

By WILLIAM PFAFF

NATIONALISM IS THE MOST powerful political force of the twentieth century. It is likely to prove the most powerful of the twenty-first as well. It is a profound, if often malign, expression of human identification and attachment, a negative force, but also a positive one. It is an expression of love as well as of hate. It is a fundamental element in modern political life and international relations. It has been the cause of much hateful violence in modern history, and is so again today in the Balkans, East-Central Europe, and the states of the former Soviet Union. It is also the force which confounded and broke the imperialism of Lenin's heirs, and Nazism's domination of Europe in the 1940s. The two totalitarian internationalist movements of this century have crimes to their account much worse than any of the crimes yet produced by nationalism, horrifying as the latter are.

Nationalism is not an ideology because it has no universality. It is impossible to be a nationalist as such, only a German or Croatian or American nationalist. However, nationalism occupies the moral and emotional ground otherwise held by political ideology, and often that which has been yielded by religion. It promotes a worship of the nation which is implicitly, if not explicitly, blasphemous.

Nationalism is usually thought a primordial historical phenomenon, the emotional binding by which political communities originally emerged, through which the ethnic community finds its historical expression and maturity. It also is usually taken to be an essential but passing stage in the march of history, necessary in producing the modern nation, but also to be left behind as more rational and progressive forms of political society take the place of the more backward.

This is not true. As a political phenomenon, nationalism is a product of the European nineteenth century, a consequence of the Romantic movement a Central European reaction to the universalizing, and therefore disorienting, ideas of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment. Lord Acton, in his great essay on nationality, speaks of 'national' sentiment as first exhibited in resistance to the French Revolution's universalizing ideas and the revolutionary and Napoleonic

armies' efforts to impose French rule abroad. After the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of absolutism, the liberal movement which developed in resistance to the reactionary alliance 'began in defence of liberty, religion, and nationality. All these causes were united in the Irish agitation, and in the Greek, Belgian, and Polish revolutions.' The Turkish, Dutch and Russian authorities dominating those countries

were attacked, not as usurpers, but as oppressors – because they misgoverned, not because they were of a different race. Then began a time when the text simply was, that nations would not be governed by foreigners . . . National rights, like religion, had borne part in the previous combinations, and had been auxiliaries in the struggles for freedom, but now nationality became a paramount claim which . . . was to prevail at the expense of every other cause for which nations make sacrifices.

It was, Acton concludes, 'a retrograde step in history'.¹

Pre-national history

The nation-state itself is a modern phenomenon. In the past there were local loyalties to place and clan or tribe, obligations to lord or landlord, dynastic or territorial wars, but primary loyalties were to religion, God or god-king, possibly to emperor, to a civilization as such. There was no nation. To be Chinese was to belong to a civilization which was presumed to be universal, or if not universal to have only barbarians beyond it. To be Mesopotamian or Roman was to belong to an inclusive empire of indeterminate borders. The foreigner fortunate enough to be incorporated into Rome's empire sought the privilege of citizenship.

To be a European in the Middle Ages was, for the vast majority, to be a Christian, with obligations and rights with respect to a land-holding hierarchy dependent, in theory at least, upon the Christian Emperor, the Roman Emperor's successor, and the Pope, God's vicar on earth. One might fight against a liege-lord's rival, or the emperor's enemies, or go on crusade against the pagans or heretics, but none of these obligations was connected to membership in a distinct and individual ethnic group or political entity different from all others.

The number of nations with a more or less coherent history of independent existence before modern times is very small: England (Britain), France, Denmark (but not in its present borders), Sweden, Poland, Japan . . . Germany's unification, under Prussia, occurred only

in 1870; its reunification, without most of Prussia, in 1990. Austro-Hungary was never a nation, but an empire. Austria itself became a nation in 1918, but the Austrians willingly gave it up when Hitler launched the *Anschluss* in 1938. The Roman Empire was Italian, but Italy did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century. Lombardy, the Kingdom of Sicily, the Kingdom of Naples, the Venetian Empire, the Papal States, Savoy and Piedmont – they are what existed before. Greece vanished into the Roman Empire before the birth of Christ and re-emerged from the Ottoman Empire only in the nineteenth century.

The ethnic nation

The original nations, Britain and France, were created by dynastic hazard and rivalry, and had no unitary ethnic base. England's prehistoric population suffered invasion by the Celts before the Roman conquest, and by various Germanic peoples afterwards, until its Norman French (which is to say, Scandinavian) conquest and colonization. Since 1945 Britain has acquired Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and West Indian minorities (African and Indo-Pakistani by origin), a recolonization of the colonizer by the colonized, a phenomenon experienced by other former European colonial powers as well. France's population is composed of Gauls, Celts, Scandinavians (Normans), Catalans, Basques, Latins, Germans and other groups, and in modern times Jews, Poles, Spaniards, Italians, Algerians, Moroccans, Indo-Chinese and black Africans, etc.

Outside Europe, there have been no nations other than those, among them the United States, which were established as Europe's outposts. Japan is perhaps the exception to that generalization. Siam, Cambodia, like China, were kingdoms, realms, not nations with a corporate consciousness. India was a Hindu civilization dominated – after the Moghuls came – by an Islamic élite, and after that, by a British one.

The ethnic nations of contemporary Europe were all established between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries from the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires, on the basis of an imputed ethnic identity for which, more often than not, there is little scientific warranty. The nations of Eastern and Balkan Europe are the product of successive migrations of peoples. Few can seriously claim to be, or to have ever been, ethnically homogenous. Albania might make such a claim, and Hungary (but what is historical Hungary without its Jews?). Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims on the other hand are all exactly the same people, speaking the same language. There is no 'ethnic' difference between them, only a difference of religion and historical experience.

It was argued in the nineteenth century that the 'reactionary' Hapsburg and Ottoman systems imprisoned 'young' peoples meant by history to live individual national lives. This expressed the assumptions of the Social Darwinism of the period: nations were young, vigorous, expanding; or mature and static; or in decline, ready to be displaced by others.

The development of nationalism within the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires was connected with the traumas of modernization, perturbing the social order in what were essentially feudal and largely pre-industrial societies. Old communities and political attachments were undermined by secularization, urbanization, and the influence of liberal thought, together with the scientists' attack upon religion. This left communal attachment as the principal surviving factor in an individual's sense of identity. If in the past one had been Christian or Muslim, subject of a certain monarch or emperor or territorial magnate, now each was expected to see him- or herself as member of a nation, even when the nation was indistinct and the accoutrements of nationality had to be manufactured.

The modern Balkan nations, and some of those in East-Central Europe, were thus built or rebuilt out of the lumber of history and myth. Modern Greece, Romania, Albania, Serbia and Croatia were created in this way – and even, eventually, Israel. Zionism is the last of East-Central Europe's romantic nationalisms. Modern Germany was created by Bismarck out of the residue of feudal Germany, making an argument that a German 'race' existed which should become a nation. The proposition that there is a German 'race' sets off Germany today from the other members of the European Community and is a source of its present difficulties with its immigrant population. Citizenship is connected with membership in this 'race'. Elsewhere in Europe citizenship is secular and thus open in principle to immigration, naturalization and assimilation.

Nationality in the ethnic nation is perceived as detached from territory, although certain territories may be held essential to nations, as Serbs insist with respect to the former Yugoslav province of Kosevo: that its medieval importance to Serbia makes it forever Serb, even though Kosevo has since become all but totally populated by Muslim Albanians. Transylvania is held by Romanians to be integral to Romania even though its population is largely Hungarian. There are many such cases.

Progressive nationalism

Nationalism was for many years thought a progressive cause, a modern movement of the popular interest against empire or dynasty, a

struggle against privilege. 'This was . . . the Jacobin view, derived from Rousseau. It was also going to be the view of liberals such as Giuseppe Mazzini . . . and John Stuart Mill', as Stanley Hoffman has said.² It was the view accepted by Woodrow Wilson and the group of American intellectuals ('the Inquiry') which produced Wilson's 1918 peace proposals and committed the United States to the principle of universal national self-determination and the creation of a League of Nations (the latter subsequently rejected by the US Congress). The Allies' partition of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman territories after 1918 on the basis of this principle actually left incoherent national states obsessed with their ethnic and national quarrels, which contributed to the disorder culminating in the Second World War, quarrels which have broken out again since the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989–1990.

The progressive reputation of European nationalism was lost in the interwar years, and western opinion placed its faith in the new internationalism of the League of Nations, and after that, in the United Nations, which was meant to be a reformed League, but which was in turn thwarted by the Security Council veto and the cold war. Our progressives accepted the internationalist claims of the 'socialism' of the Comintern and Soviet Union.

After 1945, progressive hopes were also attached to the nationalism of Asia and Africa. It was generally held that granting the populations of the European colonial empires independence was a moral imperative upon the colonial powers, even if the new nations governed themselves badly, although it was the prevailing assumption that, freed of external restraint, they would govern themselves well; the influence of Rousseau's belief in the natural virtue of humanity – above all of 'uncivilized', hence uncorrupted, humanity – was still powerful, as it remains even today. They mostly have governed themselves badly, but African and Asian nationalism remains a progressive cause, the tyrants it has produced have been generally granted, in western circles until fairly recently at least, an unstated exemption from the judgements on tyranny and human exploitation readily applied elsewhere.

Nationalism again regained a progressive reputation in the aftermath of the great European liberations of 1989, to which the defiantly surviving nationalisms of the East European and Balkan countries had crucially contributed. Or so it was until the patriotism and nationalist conviction which previously had been directed against the Communist system, actually agencies of a Russian great-power nationalism, now were redirected to support the claims and grievances which each of the Balkan and Eastern European societies historically had harboured

against those others with whom geography and politics had determined that it must live.

Nationalism defined

The distinction between patriotism and nationalism is an arbitrary one. Patriotic sentiment we approve of, nationalism we deplore. My patriotism is likely to prove your nationalism. The British academics Erik Hobsbawm and Isaiah Berlin, men of a generation formed by the liberal tradition, find nationalism's exaltation of one people over others so unreasonable, and the values of internationalism so compellingly reasonable, that they have difficulty accepting that intelligent people could be nationalists. Nationalism's apparent illogicality suggests to them that it must eventually and naturally disappear, as an aberrant phenomenon, destroyed by progress.³

Contemporary academic discussions of the subject have treated nationalism as a factor in the development and modernization of a political society, or have tried – without success, in my view – to fit it into progressive or Marxist conceptions of historical evolution, in order to demonstrate that it is transient and non-essential.

Liah Greenfeld of Harvard argues that nationality is fundamentally conceptual or ideological, as well as independent of ethnicity, and that the United States is the model of modernity, which would seem to underestimate the degree to which American national identity is presently in doubt, placing in question its validity as a model of modern nationhood.⁴

Ernest Gellner, the Cambridge social anthropologist, says nationalism is the product of modern society's need for 'universal, standardized, generic education', the result of 'a *certain kind* of division of labor' characteristic of the modern world, 'complex, but also perpetually, and often rapidly, changing'. As this form of education is possible only when state and culture are linked, society produces such a linkage. 'That is what nationalism is about . . .' Pre-modern societies which fail to develop the necessary identification of state with culture fail, and are taken over by more successful societies. As nationalist conflict is the result of 'social chasms created by early industrialism, and by the unevenness of its diffusion . . .', Gellner concludes that late industrial society 'can be expected to be one in which nationalism persists, but in a muted, less virulent form'.⁵ This was written before the fall of Communism and the events of 1991 and after.

Benedict Anderson of Cornell University says the development of the printing press and the standardization of languages, and the emergence

of written vernacular literatures which followed, made possible 'imagined communities' much grander than the actual ones which existed before, and for this reason the modern nation developed, and with it national consciousness, and eventually nationalism.⁶ The bourgeois intelligentsia brought into being by the print revolution 'invited the masses into history' (a nice phrase, which he takes from another Marxist, Tom Nairn). He claims that the rise of nationalism has coincided with the decline of religion as a social force, but this seems misleading in its implication, since the decline of popular religious belief in Europe occurred during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, while nationalism first gained force in the early nineteenth century, and remains particularly powerful in the regions of eastern and southern Europe, the least touched by disbelief and secular ideas.

In Asia and Africa, nationalism – Gandhi's India the possible exception – nearly always has been an affair of the secularized élites. The languages of African 'nationalism' are English and French. On the other hand, contemporary Islamic religious fundamentalism is best understood as a response to the failure of secular nationalist movements in the Middle East in the 1950s and after. Tom Nairn, a Scot, is perhaps representative of all these academic analyses in holding that nationalism is 'a pathology'.⁷ He nonetheless considers it inevitable in modern historical development, just as neurosis is an element in personal development.

The nation as willed

None of this seems to me convincing as an explanation of nationalism, which does not need complicated explanations. Its links to the primordial human attachments to family, clan and community seem obvious. A Canadian of Russian origin, the novelist and journalist Michael Ignatieff, wrote in *The Observer* in the autumn of 1992 of a Sunday in St George's Cathedral in Lvov, in Ukraine:

... the church is packed with bareheaded men and kerchiefed women of all ages, and when they join the choir in the Alleluia, the sound floats above seven hundred heads, like a gently billowing canopy. Standing among men and women who do not hide intense, long-suppressed feelings, it becomes clear what nationalism really is: the dream that a whole nation could be like a congregation – singing the same hymns, listening to the same gospel, sharing the same emotions, linked not only to each other but to the dead buried beneath their feet.

The nineteenth-century French scholar, Ernest Renan, argued that it is 'will' which makes a nation. A nation is 'a moral consciousness', a

community with a common memory – a people which has suffered together. In a famous phrase in his 1882 lecture, 'What is a nation?', he said that the 'essence of a nation is that its people have much in common and have forgotten much'. He continued: 'Every French citizen ought to have forgotten Saint Bartholomew's Day [the mass murder of Protestants on that day in 1572] and the thirteenth century massacres of the Midi [of Albigensian heretics, by the Inquisition]'.⁸ That is to say, for the French nation to thrive, its citizens must deliberately put behind them events which have divided them.

The most practical definition of a nation probably is that of the most eminent of contemporary students of nationalism, the late Hugh Seton-Watson, and it resembles that of Renan. Seton-Watson wrote that after a lifetime of study he was

driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of a nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists. All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one. It is not necessary that the whole of the population should so feel, or so behave, and it is not possible to lay down dogmatically a minimum proportion of a population which must be so affected. When a significant group holds this belief, it possesses 'national consciousness'.⁹

The link between the fact of the nation and the belief in its necessity, nationalism, is integral.

Nationalism and human identity

The modern western nation is a practical affair. It provides defence, civil order, a system of justice, an economic structure, a framework for industry and for commercial transactions, systems of transportation and communications, etc. It demands solidarity among its citizens, which means their willingness to accept the moral and legal norms of the collectivity, to pay taxes and otherwise support the government apparatus from which all benefit, and to come to the common defence. Citizenship involves obligations and reciprocal benefits. However this nearly always possesses an emotional coloration, often intense – an attachment to country, '*patrie*' or 'fatherland' that repeatedly has caused people to disregard others' claims to justice, or disregard reason, or a common morality.

Nationalism's threat

Nationalism challenges the instrumentalist conception of the state, and the democratic conception of it as agent of the people in their self-

governance. It tends to substitute a form of idolatry, which is in fact a form of self-worship, inviting Isaiah Berlin's comment that nationalism 'expresses the inflamed desire of the insufficiently regarded to count for something among the cultures of the world'. But of course nationalism is not confined to the weak and insufficiently regarded. It is equally a phenomenon of the strong – of Nazi Germany, but also of modern Britain, France and the United States.

Progress

Progressive political thought in the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, has rested on the assumption that humans experience a natural development towards higher and implicitly more virtuous forms of political and social organization and conduct. There is in this a secularization of that belief in the meaningfulness of history which western civilization (in contrast with the great Asian civilizations) has derived from the two biblical religions. Historical existence has been understood by Jews and Christians as a journey from a beginning in creation to an ending and fulfilment in God. This fulfilment, whether in the Messiah's coming or, as a Christian must say, his second coming, has been understood as completing time as we understand it. A perfected humanity then exists beyond historical time. The suffering and evil experienced in the course of the historical journey must, for the Christian, be transcended through the practice of love of God and of each other and the acceptance of grace, in the understanding that the journey will not be completed until God's intention is fulfilled, and that only then will historical time end.

That at least has been my belief, so that confronted with the evidence of the twentieth century we must, in my opinion, humbly respect the tragic element in history, product – as Newman put it – of humanity's implication 'in some terrible aboriginal calamity', from which it will eventually emerge, thanks to Christ's redemption, but in a fulfilment of history that is outside time.

This view does not and could not deny the obvious progress of human institutions toward more complex and sophisticated forms. It recognizes that we go forward today by institutional arrangements that have ameliorated the way communities deal with one another, searching in the political order for ways to overcome the limits of our national loyalties, or to subsume them into the affirmation of a larger interest, a reconstruction of a lost internationalism. It recognizes the Christian vocation to struggle to establish the fullness of life for humans living today, and to perfect our community within the limits imposed by our fallibility and weakness.

But it is a great error, I believe, to fail to understand the difference between the progress of an imperfect civilization and a perfection of humanity itself. The belief that humanity can be perfected within historical time has produced the two greatest historical calamities of our century, Communist and Nazi totalitarianism. The enormity of Soviet, Maoist, Khmer Rouge and Nazi ambitions, to remake humanity according to their visions, historicist and 'scientific' in the first case, eugenic and racialist in the second, produced an equivalent enormity in the measures they employed – for if humanity itself can be perfected by the actions of individuals and governments, what obstacle can be allowed to stand in the way?

It has always seemed to me a crucial political datum that humanity is not perfectible by the effort of humans alone. Men and women can seek grace and perfection and grow better, or as individuals they may grow worse, but humanity, as such, does not grow better, or if it does, only God knows. There is no such evidence available from history, or in the observation of contemporary political affairs – from Sarajevo to Sarajevo let us say. Human identity lies in a perilous and radical freedom, and in commitment to the dazzling existence of a divine Intelligence. Politics is a secular instrument of the consequences of human freedom, and history the record.

Nationalism

Our political duty would seem to me to assert the secular nature of the state and disconnect it from the eschatological assumptions and redemptive expectations that characterize many contemporary nationalisms (which also characterized the twentieth-century totalitarianisms). The intellectual task is to combat the false ideas of ethnic nationhood, of ethnic exclusivity and superiority, and to assert the primacy of human unity. The religious obligation is to deny the blasphemy which makes the nation an object of worship. We must insist that the state is a practical instrument of common life and human coexistence, and the nation an historical community like any other. Commitment to a nation on such terms is a natural phenomenon of common life, and is not incompatible with a religious commitment to the effort to transcend the historical predicament.

It has been the anomic humans, lacking communal or religious attachments to tell them who and what they are, who have proven the most vulnerable to the modern paganisms. In the circumstances of the contemporary world, its traditional attachments ravaged and the anonymity and anomic of mass society privileged, a nationalism which

identifies secular triumph with a collective moral justification will remain a powerfully seductive answer to the questions which have to be answered: who and what am I? Christianity's answer is radical and liberating, but that of the modern paganism is easier and immediate.

NOTES

¹ Acton, John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Baron, *Essays on freedom and power* (New York: Meridian, 1955).

² Hoffman, Stanley, 'Nations are nuisances', *The New York Times Book Review* (7 October 1990).

³ Hobsbawm, E. J., *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge, 1990); Berlin, Isaiah, *The crooked timber of humanity: chapters in the history of ideas*, ed Henry Hardy (New York: Knopf, 1991), quoted in Nathan Gardels, 'Two concepts of nationalism: an interview with Isaiah Berlin', *The New York Review of Books* (21 November 1991).

⁴ Greenfeld, Liah, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1992).

⁵ Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

⁶ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (revised edition, London: Verso, 1991).

⁷ Nairn, Tom, *The break-up of Britain* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

⁸ Renan, Ernest in *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Et autres essais politiques*, ed Joël Roman, Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992).

⁹ Seton-Watson, Hugh, *Nations & states: an inquiry into the origins of nations and the politics of nationalism* (London: Methuen, 1977); 'Unsatisfied nationalisms', *The Journal of Contemporary History* volume 6/1 (London, January 1971).