Nationalisms: Purification, Privilege, Pride, and Protection

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In the aftermath of WW2, nationalism was regarded by many political philosophers as an afront to civilized values. Yet at the same time nationalism has been an important means by which former colonies have attained and protected their independence. Once this distinction is made, it is clear that there are different types of nationalism, used in different circumstances, and for different purposes, and many political theorists have attempted to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable forms of nationalism. In this paper, I contribute to this debate by distinguishing four functions of nationalism: purification, privilege, pride, and protection. These functions can be mixed together in different ways, and I claim that purification and privilege are both highly problematic, while pride, and especially protection, are far more defensible.

Keywords: nationalism, cosmopolitanism, patriotism, colonialism, purification, privilege, pride, protection

In his paper "Self-Government Revisited", Brian Barry writes:

> An extraordinary amount of what makes [the 20th Century] intellectually distinctive is the membership of two groups: assimilated German-speaking Jews and Viennese…And it is hardly to be wondered at if…the doctrines of nationalism and self-determination have been treated as inimical to civilized values. Self-determination [in the form of ethnically/racially homogeneous nation states] reduced Vienna from the status of the cosmopolitan capital of an empire [that welcomed German-speaking Jews] to something closer to that of a provincial town. (Barry 1991, 157)

This remarkable passage captures, I think, the spirit of many who grew up with liberal, democratic, progressive, values, whether by instinct or osmosis. Nationalism brings up fearful images of blood, soil, and rallying around the flag, defining itself, both intellectually and often materially, in

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opposition to outsiders. It is the politics of "friends and enemies" to use the terms of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt, notoriously, claimed that the distinction between friends and enemies is the essence of politics (Schmitt 2007).

Yet liberals hope to transcend Schmitt's oppositional politics, supposing that everyone can be, if not friends, then at least not enemies. In opposition to nationalism, the liberal, progressive sentiment can turn into a form of cosmopolitanism, starting from the assumption of the moral equality of all human beings and seeking to turn high-minded assumptions of moral equality into a political reality.

At its most ambitious cosmopolitanism becomes a theory of world government, as once advocated by Bertrand Russell, albeit for him as government that exists above existing states, rather than a thorough-going replacement for them (Russell 1961). Russell proposed something akin to a League of Nations with a monopoly of serious weaponry. Others, noticing that political unity tends to build upon a common language, made the invention and advocacy of Esperanto part of that vision. The full cosmopolitan ideal of a single world state, though, has rarely been proposed as a serious possibility.

That said, philosophical approaches which accept the existence of independent states, but try to build a broader affiliation between them, seeking commonalities and cooperation rather than emphasizing difference and competition, are more common. Forms of global cooperation have been advocated in the name of a (softer) form of cosmopolitanism, especially by those writing on global justice, or, in the case of Russell, looking for ways of guaranteeing world peace.

The idea, though, that global solidarity can replace national identity has itself come under attack. First, and most obviously, it seems psychologically unrealistic. Without always welcoming the fact, many will accept that the great majority of human beings have a need to identify with a group which is less than the group of all human beings.

To this degree Hegel seems to have been right: we define ourselves in terms of the other. Whether Schmitt is also right, and the other must be an enemy, is less obvious. But still, global solidarity, if it's all we have, does not answer the need for commonality with some, and difference from others. Hence, it is said, cosmopolitanism is naïve and unrealistic.

A different critique is not so much that cosmopolitanism is naïve or idealistic, but that its down-playing of national boundaries comes with a severe danger. If, for instance, we think that state borders are needed not because there is anything morally salient about nations, but only for administrative efficiency, then we can ask whether the current configuration of nation-states is optimal and reassess the borders we find ourselves with.

If, for example, as Russell claimed, there are great advantages in economies of political scale, why should we not welcome the incorporation of a small state into the sovereignty of a larger one? In other words, could cosmopolitanism provide a justification for aggressive behaviour, such as forms of colonialization?

This, it has been argued, was at least one rationale by which the Soviet Union expanded its territory, and it could also be used in defence of some forms of empire or settler behaviour. Those who object to this argument may find themselves having to concede that is there is, after all, some intrinsic importance to the national boundaries as they currently exist, at least in protection from aggression.

Defenders of cosmopolitanism will not accept the conclusion that cosmopolitanism can be a defence of imperial policy. There is an important difference between a justification and a rationalisation, and while the Soviet Union, and other imperialist actors, may have downplayed the importance of national boundaries when attempting to absorb other lands, their real motivation was acquiring new territory, resources, and labour, rather than exemplifying the equality of all. Their instrumentalization of cosmopolitan ideas is revealed when other countries threaten to take some of the land they currently control and they defend it with great force. Still, this argument for economies of scale does expose a potential vulnerability in cosmopolitanism.

Another common objection to cosmopolitanism is its association with the continued rise of economic globalization, with large multinational traders voraciously seeking new markets and opposing tariffs and other barriers to international commerce. Cheap imports benefit local consumers, but at the cost of local producers, and, very often, the longer term development of national economies. Even the largest economies worry about cheap imports flooding their markets, making it impossible for local producers to compete, thereby leading to factory closures and the loss of jobs. Hence, states at all levels of development wish to police their national economic borders.

The cynical case against economic cosmopolitanism was put particularly starkly in a 1927 book, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, by French philosopher, novelist, and cultural commentator, Julien Benda:

> It is the impulse of a category of men—workers, bankers, industrialists—who unite across borders in the name of their own particular, pragmatic interests, and who only oppose the national spirit because it disrupts their satisfaction of these same interests. (Benda 2021, 62)

Accordingly, apart from claims of political or psychological naivety, cosmopolitanism is seen as leading to the erosion of both national sovereignty

in the sense of political independence and of local economies. Campaigns to protect against these threats have a type of Janus face. When asserted by wealthy countries, they can look like an attempt to protect a level of privilege that might have been unjustly acquired in the first place. Yet when asserted by developing countries, especially those trying emerge from the burden of imperialism, they present a case to which progressive liberals will be much more sympathetic.

Gandhi, for example, who might be the very last person one would associate with the aggressive, oppressive, nationalism that Barry outlines, strongly relied on aspects of political and economic nationalism in making his campaign for Indian independence. Similar arguments have been made in decolonisation movements around the world, from Africa and South America, to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and the protection of Ukraine from Russian aggression today.

All this means that the simple opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, in terms of respect for national borders verses the desire to transcend them, is far too simple and covers up many pertinent distinctions. Rather than "nationalism: for or against?", we need to start from a different set of questions, perhaps "nationalism: what and why?". As we have implicitly noted already, nationalism in Europe of the 1930s looks very different to the nationalisms of the Global South of the 1950s and the nationalism of Ukraine today.

How, then, should we understand nationalism? Given the profusion of writing on the topic, and the multiple attempts to capture its definition, one may have sympathy with the remark of journalist and novelist Joseph Roth that "Nationality is a Western concept. It was an invention of Western European scholars, who ever since have struggled to explain it" (Roth 2001, 15). Yet it may be more fruitful to follow the line of thought recently presented by Harris Mylonas and Maya Tudor, who, while noting the disarray of writings on nationalism, helpfully suggest:

> nationalism has three core attributes: (1) an intersubjective recognition and celebration of an imagined community as a locus of loyalty and solidarity, (2) a drive for sovereign self-rule over a distinct territory pursued by a significant segment of a group's elite, and (3) a repertoire of symbols and practices that embody the nation. (Mylonas and Tudor 2023, 7)

They go on to propose a particular definition of nationalism: "We understand nationalism as an intersubjective awareness of an imagined community together with a meaningful degree of collective action to attain self-rule and full sovereignty over a particular territory for this community" (Mylonas and Tudor 2023, 9).

Mylonas and Tudor are aware that this definition will be contested: for example, their third core attribute of symbols and practices is present only, perhaps, implicitly, and there is no mention of a shared language, or, perhaps more importantly, shared ethnicity. Their view is that these elements are not necessary conditions. On language, think of Switzerland, among many others, on ethnicity, think of almost every nation on earth. As Mylonas and Tudor also suggest, we might do better to think of nationalism as a "family resemblance" concept, and they have usefully identify some of the overlapping features that members of the family of nations have in common.

I suggested that our two questions should be "nationalism: what and why?". We've sketched an answer to the "what" question above, but how do we answer the "why?" question?

On one level this may seem like a baffling question. Nations "are". They exist. They are a fact, or perhaps a collection of facts. Not everything needs an explanation. Yet at the same time it is easy to forget how recent, and in some sense, how arbitrary, some of the nation states even of Western Europe are.

The unification of both Italy and Germany are generally reported as taking place in 1871, with the borders, especially in the case of Germany, shifting time and time again since. Hence, in her short essay, written for a popular audience, "The Origins of Germany", historian C.V. Wedgwood writes:

> Germany has no frontiers; not only no natural frontiers but no self-explanatory political frontiers. The sea is the most effective of natural frontiers with mountains—provided they are high and barren enough—a good second; rivers are a perennial source of dispute. It is, however, only necessary to look at the physical map of Europe to see that Germany has no evident framework. Geographically there is no reason for her existence. This is, of course, true of other countries: a nation is a political, not necessarily a geographical, entity, and although an indisputable boundary—like Great Britain's—is an advantage to the state, as valuable as it is unusual, it is not indispensable to healthy growth. (Wedgwood 1946, 54)

The reasons for the unification of Germany are conventionally said to include bringing together those who speak a common language—but as it worked out not all adjacent German-speaking lands were unified into a single nation state—and the economic benefits of a customs union as well as the efficiency of a single political administration and a unified military. Karl Marx, for example, in 1843 bemoaned Germany's economic backwardness, identifying the proliferation of customs posts between principalities as one of the causes and symptoms of its comparative disadvantage with France and Great Britain. (Marx 2000). But even to say this must have implied a type of latent existence of a country that had not yet formed.

What, though, are the features of the rise of the nationalism of the early parts of the 20th Century that ultimately led to WW2? It would be a stretch to think there must be a single explanation, but at least in some cases the narrative of "friends and enemies' took a new form. Rather than defining the nation in terms of those residing inside territorial boundaries versus those outside, the focus became "the enemy within". Especially for those countries that were previously on the losing side of WW1, someone, or rather some group, had to be found to blame.

For Germany the mythical narrative of betrayal became common: Jews were war profiteers; they didn't fight on the front line; they isolated themselves as "the chosen people" rather than as loyal Germans, and so on. The assimilated Jews' who protested that they were as German as any others were brushed aside.

Nationalism in the hands of the Nazis included what I shall call a type of *purification*, to remove elements said to have weakened the nation, which therefore needed to be restored to national strength and glory. It is this form of nationalism, surely, that Brian Barry picked out as being thought to be "inimical to civilised values."

But the nationalism that has under-pinned opposition to empire and colonialism surely need not take this form, even if, in some cases such as Uganda under Idi Amin, or the Rwandan genocide, it has strongly related elements.

Think once more of contemporary Ukraine. Its assertion of national sovereignty to defend its independence as part as a post-colonial struggle and to fend off Russian aggression today, is very different from the purification programme of the Nazis. Of course, Putin has traded on a potential confusion of different forms of nationalism to insinuate the existence of practices of Neo-Nazism in Ukraine, but this is obviously a deliberate, rhetorical obfuscation rather than a clear perception (Putin 2021, see also Popova and Shevel 2024). Putin's conflation reminds us that nationalism takes several forms—some "good" and some "bad"—with different features and possibilities of justification.

Many commentators have been alive to the range of different positions that fall under the same heading of "nationalism" and have seen both its dangers and attraction—perhaps even inevitability. In order to answer the "why nationalism" question they have attempted to find a distinction between approved and unacceptable forms of nationalism. Orwell distinguished between "nationalism" and "patriotism", seeing nationalism as tied to an objectionably aggressive desire for power, and patriotism as admirable pride in a country allied to a wish to defend rather than force itself on others (Orwell 1968).

Alasdair MacIntyre asked "Is Patriotism a Virtue?", defining patriotism in terms of loyalty to one's nation on the basis of its characteristics and attributes, and in itself a source of values, in contrast to a rather anaemic liberal impersonal morality which finds ties of blood problematic. MacIntyre contrasts patriotism to a type of unthinking loyalty based merely on membership, rather than appreciation of the particular character of one's nation, thereby implicitly marking the distinction between nationalism and patriotism (MacIntyre 2002).

Others have distinguished between "exclusive" nationalism, often building on a single ethnic or religious identity, and "inclusive" nationalism, which welcomes a multiplicity of groups into the unity of the nation.

All of these distinctions have merit. Yet I'd like to focus on a different way of approaching distinctions between different forms of nationalism, based on the *function* that nationalism is intended to serve. To put this in terms introduced earlier, the distinction is based on how they answer the "why nationalism?" question.

For alliterative reasons, I'll call the four options I shall consider: "purification", "privilege", "pride", and "protection". Some examples of nationalism will incorporate all four. My suggestion is that the stronger the strands of protection and pride and the weaker the strands of privilege and (most notably) purification the more morally acceptable nationalism will be. Perhaps the names themselves are sufficiently descriptive that little further explanation is needed. But to prevent misunderstanding, I'll briefly explain what I mean by these terms.

"Purification", which I introduced earlier in the context of Nazi Germany, is the most disturbing form of nationalism, or better yet, the most disturbing element in the complex combination of functions any actual nationalism is likely to have. Purification seeks to remove people from the territory if they do not fit the profile of those said truly to belong to it.

"Remove" can take many forms. Expulsion is the most common, but as we know mass murder has also been seen, with "ethnic cleansing" an ambiguous hybrid of the two, and sometimes, especially where religious identity is involved, "conversion" is offered as an option. If we assume even a most minimal morality of respect for all, it is very easy to see programmes of purification as "inimical to civilised values" and therefore indefensible on moral grounds.

In its most objectionable forms, purification victimises existing residents, including in some cases those with long-standing citizenship, on the basis of their real or assigned group membership. Other instances of purification put up barriers to entry for particular groups, as, for example, in the notorious "White Australia" policy.

Overtly racist policies have not completely disappeared, but are less common now. Nevertheless in many wealthy countries, such as The United States and The United Kingdom, the perceived need to control borders has become a potent political issue. Why is this seen as so important?

One possibility is that the countries concerned want to keep their populations pure in some sense, and hence these policies are yet more instances of purification in all but name. But more likely, the official political discourse will be in terms of the likely social and economic effects of immigration, with fears of increased competition for jobs, school places, housing, health care, and so on. Now, these arguments are often contested on empirical grounds. For the sake of the argument, however, let us suppose that the opponents are right; that immigration would reduce living standards of current residents.

The argument that immigration will reduce living standards of current citizens is often taken to be an irrefutable argument against immigration. But it presumes that existing citizens have some sort of justified claim to the living standards they currently enjoy, or at least a claim relative to outsiders, and there are several reasons to question such claims.

The first is that these living standards are among the highest in the world, and for the most part those who live in them do so through pure accident of birth. What argument is there that their living standards should be maintained while other people, including potential immigrants, do so much worse and immigration will reduce some of the difference?

Second, those living standards are very likely to be the legacy of decades, if not centuries, of historical injustice, and hence any claims of entitlement have a very shaky foundation. In other words, the assertion of national sovereignty over borders is an attempt to solidify an undeserved *privilege* and hence is highly questionable on moral grounds, if not as objectionable as purification.

That said, many contemporary defenders of nationalism will deny that they are trying to keep the nation genetically pure or that they wish to protect unjustified privilege. Rather, they understand nationalism as closer to MacIntyre's definition of patriotism, which is a form of loyalty based on identification and appreciation of the attributes and characteristics of one's nation. Yael Tamir's *Why Nationalism?*, for example, lays out layer after layer of sources of *pride* that many will feel for aspects of one's nation (Tamir 2018).

When one's country does well in an international sporting contest, or when a particular entertainer achieves international fame, or even when a commercial company has global success, many nationals of that country will glow. Countries take pride in their cuisines, their standards of design, their music, literature and art. Not only do we regard such pride as morally ac-

ceptable, perhaps even admirable, we can also feel that those who lack pride are missing something; something of moral importance.

This is part of MacIntyre's opposition to liberal morality, suggesting that the origin of morality is a type of local loyalty. Whatever we think of that, we can be sympathetic to the point that the motivations and experience of purification, privilege, and pride are quite different, even if some nationalist narratives will (deliberately?) present them all together as part of a seamless whole.

There is, though, a further element in arguments for national sovereignty offered by those in developing countries or those attempting to emerge from a colonial legacy. These arguments are typically less concerned with questions of immigration, but concentrate on allowing countries *protection* over their own "policy space" rather than being controlled by international organisations such as The World Bank, or international lenders, or in the worst cases, neo-colonialist aggressors. Hence, we see demands for self-determination of economic policy, of trade relations, and of political sovereignty, among other things, as well as military guarantees of borders, including calls for international assistance for protection.

In general, the intention behind policies of protection is not to protect underserved privilege, but rather to create and protect the conditions in which fledgling nations can grow in strength, with the aim of taking a full place on the world stage. This is why it can seem progressive to support forms of nationalism for developing countries, but often, more problematic for developed countries.

It would be naïve to suppose that every form of nationalism can be assigned to just one of the four categories of purification, pride, privilege, or protection. It is likely that there will be strands of each in different nations and particular arguments for nationalism are likely to blend different considerations in ways that may be hard to untangle. But I think the overall position is clear.

From a progressive, liberal egalitarian perspective, purification can never be justified; and privilege is highly problematic, needing a careful analysis of the arguments. Pride, however, though sitting uneasily with impersonal liberal morality, may, as MacIntrye suggests, show the limits of such a morality, and there seems good reason to consider how national pride and liberalism can flourish together. And protection, can, in some circumstances, be a requirement of global justice, as we see in post-colonial movements in general and in Ukraine today in particular.

In conclusion, posing the bare question: "nationalism, for or against?" covers up the different elements that make up a complex picture, with each example needing to be understood and evaluated in its own terms. My hope

is that the framework offered here will assist us in making distinctions between different examples.

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