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NATIONALISM

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Conclusion

Nationalism is too diverse to allow a single general theory to explain it all. Much of the content and specific orientation of various nationalisms is determined by historically distinct cultural traditions, the creative actions of leaders, and contingent situations within the international order. What can be addressed in more general, theoretical terms are the factors that lead to the continual production and reproduction of nationalism as a central discursive formation in the modern world. These do not explain all the implications or characteristics of nationalist discourse, but they offer a first step in the attempt to understand why it exists and retains its importance.

Nationalism draws on cultural traditions and ethnicity, but neither its form nor its historically specific prevalence in the modern era is explained by these factors. Rather, it is necessary to look first and foremost at the ways in which nationalism constitutes a discursive formation that both shapes and attempts to cope with the rise of the modern state. One of the first aspects of this is the effort to secure widespread participation in state governance. Nationalism plays a crucial, though often unexamined, role in the modern discourse of political legitimacy. Legitimacy turns, in much of that discourse, on the extent to which specific institutions of rule represent or serve the interests of "the people"; nationalism is the rhetoric or discourse in which attempts are made to establish who the relevant people are. Their categorical identity is constructed through the discourse of nationalism. Challenges to putatively illegitimate governments can then be brought forward in the name of the nation.

Processes of state formation play an important part in furthering the integration of nations and therefore the salience of national identities. Along with the development of better transport and communications infrastructures and the extension of market relations and expansion of production organizations, development of state administrative capacities greatly increases the interconnections among different regions of a country. As they do so, they undermine various quasi-autonomous local organizations and sometimes repress contending candidate nations. In the course of unifying a country, they establish greater levels of internal cultural commonality, including linguistic uniformity. Cultural similarities are seized upon in the constitution of categorical identities. The discourse of nationalism provides expression to this process. But as a discursive formation, nationalism shapes the form of representation, not its precise contents or level of inclusion. Thus nationalist rhetoric offers direct expression to the process of unification through representations of the encompassing nation claimed at the scale of the state or even

beyond it. At the same time, nationalist rhetoric is also used to represent the opposing claims to autonomy on the part of subject peoples and those who refuse integration into growing nation-states.

In both state formation and independence movements, the discourse of nationalism prompts the attempt to secure a satisfactory fit between nation and state. This is made especially important by the political ideologies emphasizing citizenship, for the participation of citizens demands a kind of lateral connection to each other and a kind of exclusive loyalty to the state not required by empires and other older forms of polity. The claim to national "self-determination," a staple of independence movements, is very closely tied to this discourse in which political legitimacy rises from the people, even though self-determination is sometimes claimed on behalf of a nation by elites with no intention of instituting democracy or any form of popular participation in government.

The issues of autonomy, self-determination and proper fit between nation and state necessarily are addressed only in the context of a world of other states. The organization of this world reflects, in part, the process of capitalist expansion with its partial separation between the units of economic and political organization. It reflects also the division of virtually the entire population and territory of the world into states (and their dominions), so that people can identify their place in the world, have some voice, and claim autonomy mainly through their membership in a nation and citizenship in a state. In Western Europe, the nationalist project centered on making state and nation coincide—by amalgamating and consolidating territory, and also by transforming populations from diverse provincials into more “integrated” nationals. But the same European states often created colonial empires, each extending its state beyond its nation. This created a basic tension that helped to fuel new nationalist movements.

While it is important to emphasize the domestic roots of the discourse of nationalism, nothing calls forth more compelling nationalist discourse and commitments than international conflicts, wars. While non-state economic actors (like multinational corporations) may expand their roles, states remain the main mechanism for attempting to regulate their activity and the only large-scale arenas in which to claim rights of participation. Interstate migrations also reinforce nationalism, both by provoking reactionary responses in some host countries and by contributing to the national consciousness of those who experience the crossing of borders. But above all, modern warfare has become inextricably tied to the idea of nation.

Finally, the modern discourse of national identity is closely linked to the idea of the individual. Nations are constructed as "super-individuals" on the one hand and categories of equivalent individuals on the other. An immediate, direct relationship is posited between individuals and their nations; national identity assumes a special priority over other collective identities in the construction of personal identity. Membership in a nation is not derived from membership in any other collectivity--family, community, etc.; it may be reinforced by kinship or other network bonds, but it is of a different form and order. Invoking or giving voice to large-scale categorical identities enables the discourse of nationalism to situate people in the world order (or disorder). Membership in a nation is a mediation between the discrete individual and the impersonal forces that affect his or her life while remaining beyond the control of direct, interpersonal relationships. The power with which such categorical identities shape us reflects importantly the power we know that states and large-scale economic activity have over us.

The discourse of nationalism can be used in democratic attempts to manage those large-scale forces. As categorical identities, indeed, nations help answer the question of who is entitled to participate in a modern state, an embarrassing question for democratic theory since it involves the admission of exclusivity. National identity is also a source of solidarity to bind people together despite their differences, though it can easily slip into use as a "trump card" against those differences. Though nationalism and democracy have been closely related in the modern era, there is nothing inherently democratic about nationalism. Proponents of malign—and indeed sometimes illusory--solutions to popular grievances often employ the discourse of nationalism. Not just advocates of ethnic cleansing or bellicosity towards neighbors, but those who use talk of national interest to deflect attention from self-interested domestic policies and those who support unlikely separatisms as bases for improbable economic development all rely on the emotional power which national identity carries. So do more admirable advocates of national solidarity, care for all the nation's members, and self-sacrifice in the common interest.

Nationalism moves people emotionally, not least because it provides a sense of location in a large and complex world and an enormous reach of history. It is crucial to grasp that nationalism is a positive source of meaning—and even sometimes inspiration--and of mutual commitment among very large groups of people. If it were merely illusion and manipulation it could not have the power that it does. But this discursive formation commonly leads even those with the noblest of goals to address their nations as perduring, nearly fixed identities moving through history rather than constructed within it. Such a view of the nation is apt to deny the

exercise of power involved both in its construction and in its continued internal organization. Such a view is also apt to resist the heterodox claims of various individuals and groups within the nation--those who would remake it or ask of it space to live differently from the ways authorized in dominant nationalist ideologies.

Solutions to the problems suggested in the preceding paragraph will require much future work. Such future work will depend, however, on understanding why the idea of nation and claims to national identity are so basic to modern politics and culture, and on recognizing the difference between the highly general nationalist discourse that shapes the modern era and the numerous and heterogeneous specific movements, policies, ideologies and conflicts that are constituted through use of that discourse.