

# **Nationalism: Irrelevant in an Interconnected World?**

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Nationalism has arguably been the most powerful ideological force in world politics over the last 200 years, its influence being truly global and more sustained than 'classical' ideologies such as liberalism and socialism. And yet, in the twenty-first century nationalism is facing a unique set of challenges which, some argue, spell the demise of the ideology itself. Stemming from a seemingly relentless tendency towards interconnectedness and transnationalism, the most important of these challenges are globalization, regionalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. How and why do these forces challenge nationalism? In what ways has nationalism adapted in the face of them? Rather than 'rolling back' nationalism, may these challenges be precipitating a revival of nationalism, and if so, what form is this taking?

## **The challenge of globalization**

Most of the debate about the relevance of nationalism in an increasingly interconnected world focuses on the implications of globalization, especially economic globalization. The fact that the rise of nationalism from the late eighteenth century onwards typically coincided with the emergence of a national (rather than local or regional) economy suggests that the shift from a national to a global economy would be likely to challenge nationalism in important ways. After all, if national sovereignty, the defining principle of the nation-state, is to retain any meaning at all it must surely imply control over the economic activity that takes place within a nation's borders.

However, in a process that began in the early post-1945 period but accelerated profoundly in the 1990s, more and more aspects of economic life have come to have a 'transborder' character. This can be seen, for example, in the ability of transnational corporations to locate

and relocate production in states or areas that are favourable to efficiency and profitability. Perhaps most dramatically, the application of new information and communication technologies has allowed a global financial system to come into operation, in which transborder capital and currency transactions are conducted literally at 'the speed of light'. Although the impact of global economic interconnectedness has not been even across the world, it has left very few nations unaffected, North Korea perhaps being the last remaining example of an economically sovereign nation-state.

*Is nationalism compatible with globalization?*

Nevertheless, it is far from clear that the advent of a 'borderless world' must bring about the end of the nation-state. Although globalization may provide new and challenging circumstances for nationalism, it can also generate fresh opportunities for redefining nationhood and national identity. This has certainly happened in East and Southeast Asia, where 'tiger' states such as Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan have embraced globalization as a strategy for national economic success in a global context. Singapore is a particular example of this. Lacking the ethnic and cultural unity of conventional nation-state, Singapore has nevertheless become possibly the most globalized state in the world. Basic to this process have been attempts by the ruling People's Action Party to inculcate civic nationalism by instilling a sense of pride in the public institutions of the state as well as patriotic pride in the populace itself, in part by generous investment in technologically glossy public amenities. Civic nationalism thus helps to legitimise authoritarian rule and ensure social control, which, in turn, attract foreign capital, thereby maintaining the growth levels that have underpinned patriotic pride and state allegiance.

### **Threats to nationalism**

**Cosmopolitanism** – Literally a belief in a cosmopolis or 'world state'. Cosmopolitanism implies that the world constitutes a single moral community, in the sense that people have obligations

(potentially) towards other people, regardless of nationality, religion, ethnicity and so forth. Such thinking is usually based on the doctrine of human rights.

**Globalization** – The emergence of a complex web of interconnectedness which means that our lives are shaped increasingly by events that occur, and decisions that are made, at a great distance from us. The central feature of globalization is therefore that geographical distance is of declining relevance, and that territorial borders, such as those between nation-states, are becoming less significant.

**Multiculturalism** – As a descriptive term, multiculturalism refers to cultural diversity arising from the existence within a society of two or more groups whose beliefs and practices generate a distinctive sense of identity. As a normative term, it implies a positive endorsement of communal diversity based on the right of different cultural groups to respect and public recognition.

**Regionalism** – The theory or practice of coordinating social, economic or political activities within a geographical region comprising a number of states. On an institutional level, regionalism involves the growth of norms, rules and formal structures through which coordination is brought about. 'New' regionalism focuses largely on the construction of regional trading blocs.

**Supranationalism** – The existence of an authority that is 'higher' than that of the nation-state and is thus capable of imposing its will on it. Supranationalism differs from intergovernmentalism, in that the latter allows for international cooperation only on the basis of the sovereign independence of individual states. The EU nevertheless encompasses a mixture of intergovernmental and supranational elements.

**Transnationalism** – Sustained relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations that transcend or cross national borders. Transnationalism therefore implies that

the domestic/international dividing politics has been fatally undermined, casting doubt on the continuing importance of national sovereignty and therefore the nation-state.

### **The challenge of regionalism**

Since 1945, regional organizations have sprung up in all parts of the world. The first phase of this process peaked in the 1960s, but the advance of regionalism has been particularly notable since the late 1980s. This so-called 'new' regionalism has largely been reflected in the creation of regional trade blocs, either the establishment of new ones (such as the North American Free Trade Agreement) or the strengthening of existing ones (such as the European Union). This led some to proclaim that regionalism was in the process of displacing nationalism as the central organising principle of world politics. As the world's most advanced experiment in regionalism, and the only regional organization that to date has practiced a form of supranational governance, much of the debate about the implications of regionalism has focused on the EU.

The process of European integration has widely been seen to erode national sovereignty through the shift towards political union, reflected in the use of decision-making processes that allow the collective voice to override the views of individual member states. This has occurred in a number of ways. These include the wider use of qualified majority voting and the diminishing scope of the national veto in the Council and European Council; the fact that EU law is binding on all member states, and so supersedes national law in areas where the EU has 'competence'; and that the European Commission can issue directives which national parliaments cannot overrule.

*Is nationalism compatible with regionalism/Europeanisation?*

The implications of regionalism/Europeanisation for nationalism have been the subject of considerable controversy. In contrast to the 'zero sum' approach to sovereignty adopted by Eurosceptics in particular – in which as EU bodies get stronger, national sovereignty is

necessarily diminished – supporters of European integration argue that political union actually expands the influence of member states. This is because it allows member states to 'pool' their sovereignty. Such a 'positive sum' approach to sovereignty is based on the belief that the political weight of member states increases to the extent that they work together instead of competing against each other. After all, regional integration is not a process that has to be imposed *on* nation-states; rather, it is brought about *by* nation-states, and so presumably *for* nation-states. A further way which regionalism/Europeanisation is compatible with the survival, or even strengthening, of nationalism is through its impact on sub-state nationalism. In cases such as Scotland and Catalonia it is notable that the drive for independence has been set firmly within a context of EU membership, the EU being seen to provide a framework that increases the economic and political viability of small nations.

### **The challenge of multiculturalism**

Although migration has been part of human experience throughout history, the upsurge in migratory flows that has occurred since the early 1990s, and which in 2015 saw the highest ever recorded number of international migrants worldwide (estimated at 244 million people), has been seen to have a particular significance for nationalism. This is because nations are, first and foremost, cultural entities, groups of people who are bound together by a common language, religion, history and set of traditions. International migration undermines the nation-state because it gives rise to levels of cultural diversity that strain, possibly to breaking point, the idea of a shared national identity.

This is not just a consequence of migratory flows themselves but also of the greater likelihood that, thanks, amongst other things, to mobile phones and cheap air travel, migrants are more likely in modern circumstances to retain links to their 'country of origin', weakening the development of allegiances towards their 'country of settlement'. As immigrants form enduring and significant transnational or diasporic communities, which resist assimilation into the culture of the 'host' society, multiculturalism gradually but inevitably advances at the expense

of nationalism.

*Is nationalism compatible with multiculturalism?*

However, multiculturalism draws attention not only to the trend towards increased cultural diversity; it also offers a strategy for how culturally diverse societies may remain stable and cohesive. Multiculturalists advocate the defence and celebration of ethnic and cultural diversity, typically through respect for minority rights and support for the politics of recognition, but they see this as a means of reconciling diversity with togetherness and promoting civic unity. In this view, the greatest potential source of discord within a culturally diverse society is a failure of recognition, in the form of pressure on minority groups to conform to the values and practices of beliefs of the majority group. Such thinking may provide the basis for the creation of a new, possibly twenty-first century model of nationalism, sometimes called multicultural nationalism. Multicultural nationalism sets out to balance cultural diversity against a common citizenship. Insofar as it destroys the link between nationality and ethnicity, it is very clearly a form of civic nationalism.

### **The challenge of cosmopolitanism**

Nationalism has an important ethical dimension, in that it implies that morality only makes sense when it is locally-based and grounded in the communities to which we belong and which have shaped our values. It is therefore no surprise that people everywhere give moral priority to those they know best, most obviously their family and close friends and, beyond that, members of the local community and then those with whom they share a national or cultural identity.

However, what is called ethical nationalism may be unsustainable in a world of widening and deepening interconnectedness. Transborder information and communication flows, particularly the impact of television, mean that the 'strangeness' and unfamiliarity of people and societies

on the other side of the globe has reduced substantially. News reports and especially pictures of, for example, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami provoked massive outpourings of humanitarian concern in other parts of the world, helping to fund major programmes of emergency relief. By encouraging us to extend moral obligations, potentially, to the whole of humanity, increased global connectedness is weakening ethical nationalism and promoting cosmopolitanism in its place.

*Is nationalism compatible with cosmopolitanism?*

In strict terms, ethical nationalism and cosmopolitanism are irreconcilable. While the former confines moral obligations to a particular political society, the latter sees the world as a single moral community. Nevertheless, few cosmopolitan theorists adopt an absolutist moral position which rules out any and all preferences towards one's 'own' nation or cultural group. Instead, what can be called 'realistic' cosmopolitanism accepts the doctrine of universal human rights, but accepts in international law the holds that the norm of human rights must be balanced against the norm of the national interest. In *The Laws of the People* (1999), John Rawls thus attempted to outline what he believed would be a peaceful and cooperative international order. Crucially, it did not advocate a global redistribution of wealth and resources but limited moral ambition to a number of specific goals, including the elimination of unjust war and oppression, the removal of religious persecution and restrictions on freedom of conscience, and an end to genocide and mass murder

### **Resurgent nationalism**

While there is evidence that nationalism, always the most flexible of political ideologies, has survived into the twenty-first century by adapting to the challenges of interconnectedness, perhaps a more significant development is the revival of nationalism as a reaction *against* interconnectedness, as a form of resistance. Whereas nationalism has often responded to interconnectedness by adopting a progressive face, endorsing toleration and diversity and

stressing civic, rather than ethnic, unity, these rival trends in nationalism are 'darker' and certainly more uncompromising. Resurgent nationalism has typically had a far-right political character, reflected in an insular and inward-looking view of the nation and a stress on ethnic identity.

### **Civic nationalism or ethnic nationalism?**

Civic nationalism is fashioned primarily out of shared political allegiances and political values. The nation is thus an 'association of citizens'. Civic nationalism has been defended on the grounds that it is open and voluntaristic: membership of the nation is based on choice and self-definition, not on any predetermined ethnic or historical identity. It is a form of nationalism that is consistent with toleration and liberal values generally, being forward-looking and compatible with a substantial degree of cultural and ethnic diversity. Critics, however, have questioned whether national identity is sustainable in the absence of clear cultural and ethnic affinities.

Ethnic nationalism emphasises the organic and usually ethnic unity of the nation, and aims to protect or strengthen its national 'spirit' and cultural sameness. This form of nationalism is commonly said to have a closed or fixed character. Critics of ethnic nationalism tend to argue that it breeds a fear or suspicion of foreigners and strengthens the idea of cultural distinctiveness, often interwoven with the belief in national greatness. Ethnic nationalism is thus irrational and tends to be tribalistic, even bloodthirsty. On the other hand, its capacity to generate a strong sense of political belonging may also be a virtue.

Defined, to a large extent, by what it opposes, this strain within nationalism has had an anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalist, anti-Muslim, anti-European, anti-globalization **and** anti-establishment orientation. The parties that exemplify such thinking, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, include the UK Independence Party, France's National Front, the Alternative for Germany, the Danish People's Party, Poland's Law and Justice Party, Austria's



Freedom Party, the Jobbik party in Hungary and the Swiss People's Party. In recent elections, such parties have attracted in the region of 20-30 per cent support, bolstered since 2015 by the migration crisis, while the the Freedom Party's candidate gained 49.7 per cent of the vote in narrowly losing Austria's 2016 presidential election. Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the appeal of this nationalist strain to date was the 51.9 per cent victory for the Leave camp in the UK's June 2016 referendum on EU membership.

How significant is this form of nationalism likely to be in the long run? For some, the revival of nationalism, especially in its stridently right-wing form, is part of the difficult adjustment that societies make as they come to terms with the new realities of global interconnectedness. They thus see it as a symptom of a major economic, political and cultural upheaval, rather than as an indication that this upheaval is unsustainable. In this view, resurgent nationalism provides a mouthpiece for groups that feel threatened or disadvantaged by trends such as immigration, globalization and regionalism/Europeanisation, the image of a politically independent and ethnically 'pure' nation giving them a sense of safety and security, a point of certainty in a world of dizzying change. However, the problem with this stance is that such nations have long since ceased to exist (if they ever existed) and they are not now going to be recreated. Quite simply, stopping the world and stepping off is no longer a viable political option.

On the other hand, the remarkable resilience and durability of nationalism has been cited as evidence that nations and nationhood are not merely products of a set of fortuitous (or otherwise) historical circumstances but have deeper origins, lying within the spheres of psychology, culture and biology. Primordialists, who hold that national identity is culturally and historically embedded, thus argue that nationalism cannot die or become irrelevant because there is an irresistible desire among human beings to bond with others who share the same cultural and ethnic identity as themselves. In this vein, conservatives see that nation as, in effect, an extended kinship, venerating it as the principal source of allegiance and collective belonging. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that trends towards interconnectedness that were thought to be killing nationalism have only made it stronger.

