

## IN DEFENCE OF NATIONALISM AND THE NATION STATE

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Nationalism had a remarkably bad press in the latter part of the twentieth century and continues so to do. This is partly due to semantic and conceptual confusion. Semantically, racism, fascism even good old religious warfare, as in the case of Northern Ireland, can be referred to – and in the mass media often are – as nationalism. I have even heard the fighting between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Africa described as nationalist. Yugoslavia is deemed to have exploded because of nationalism. Latterly, however, thoughtful theorists have developed a neologism to describe this form of almost internecine slaughter as ethno-nationalism.

Indeed, since Ernest Renan famously asked at a conference given in the Sorbonne on 11 March 1882, “Qu’est ce que c’est une nation?”, defining the term ‘nation’ has taxed many minds. Eric Hobsbawm says:

“But the problem is that there is no way of telling the observer how to distinguish a nation from other entities a priori, as we can tell him how to recognise a bird or to distinguish a mouse from a lizard. Nation watching would be simple if it could be like bird watching”<sup>1</sup>

However, the real problem is that there is no a priori method of distinguishing a mouse from a lizard. Our only method is, by definition, a posteriori, since any speculation concerning the identities of mice and lizards must be wholly dependent on observation and induction. Much the same applies to the nation.

Benedict Anderson, who argues that the nation really arose as an imagined community<sup>2</sup> is absolutely right, although unhelpful, since he goes on to say that any relatively large community is imaginary and so, similarly, once written about and printed, other entities became ‘real’:

“Out of the American welter came these imagined realities: nation states, republican institutions, common citizenship, popular sovereignty, national flags and anthems etc.” (Italics added.)

Examples of the definitions of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ could go in to realms quite beyond the scope of this essay.

However, there is another aspect that must be briefly mentioned here: the moral stance many adopt when viewing nationalism as ideology.

It is irrefutably an ideology. However, what kind of ideology; is it the 'blut und boden' (blood and soil) rhetoric of the German romantics or an ideology arising out of historic necessity?

Elie Kedourie<sup>3</sup> and his followers, who are legion, would have it that it is the former. Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, et al., via Kant, are blamed for the excesses of German 'nationalism'. Although romanticism run amuck could possibly be blamed for the Arian cult and its manifestation in the Nazi Party, it is in every sense difficult to ascribe this to Kant merely on the basis of a single essay in praise of the nation-state,<sup>4</sup> which preferably is always a republic. It ignores the impossibility of basing flights of emotion and sensation on the complex but highly rational and logical edifice of Kant's metaphysics and ethics, which owe more to Descartes and the Enlightenment than to a rejection thereof, which was the Romantic attitude. Kantian ethics provide, in the principle of universalisability, if anything, a basis for egalitarian democracy.<sup>5</sup>

The other explanation mentioned for the rise of nationalism is offered in the works of Ernest Gellner. As early as 1964,<sup>6</sup> he claimed that the main theoretical problem of analysis was "to separate the quite spurious 'national' and 'natural' justifications and explanations of nationalism, from the genuine, time – and context bound – roots of it." His *Thought and Change* and seminal *Nations and Nationalism*,<sup>7</sup> which followed approximately twenty years later, elaborate the rise of nationalism. As do his two later works, *Encounters with Nationalism*<sup>8</sup> and the posthumous *Nationalism*.<sup>9</sup>

His model, he says, is materialist without being Marxist:

"To resume, nationalism presents itself and is seen by its enemies as the expression of activist deep forces of blut und boden and of the atavistic striving for kinship and territoriality, of gemeinschaft. In fact of course, as, if my argument is correct, it is the expression of the modern gesellschaft, of unanimous but culturally gleichgeschaltet society, which is gleichgeschaltet not because of some kind of mania of its rulers but because of quite objective economic necessities. This is a rather materialist, though by no means a Marxist theory of nationalism, which relates it to the way in which modern society makes its living."<sup>10</sup>

“The time and context bound roots” can be summarised as the advent of modernity. His view of nationalism, which always predates the nation, is as a historical phenomenon caused entirely by specific circumstances, namely the changing mode of production. He places the rise of nationalism temporally at a point where, with the advent of industrialisation, the old agrarian order with its rigid structures, that placed members of the community in their precise social positions, breaks down and not only social mobility but also spatial mobility begins as individuals start to leave the countryside in search of better paid jobs in the developing cities. As industrialisation accelerates, so does the division of labour, necessitating a commonality of language, in turn necessitating a commonality of education, leading to the birth of a high culture. It is the fact that individuals define themselves in terms of this high culture that causes nationalist assimilation. Which in turn leads to a fervent desire to be “bullied by their own” in other words a desire “that the political and national unit be congruent”.<sup>11</sup>

This is a very brief summary indeed of Gellner’s wonderfully lucid and detailed arguments.

However, there are benefits to nationalism. Differences of class and wealth tend to get eroded in the greater ‘us’ that nationalism proffers. Indeed, it is a great equaliser. Similarly nation-states are not quite so enamoured of war somehow; the children of parents in the same nation seem a little our own and then good old self-interest pre-dominates.

I can cite one very specific example for how the Gellnerian argument does indeed hold in one specific country, that is Hungary. Here Count Becsenyei was saying well before the French Revolution that it was the job of Hungarians “to Magyarise the Danubian basin”. And, in spite of latterly successful attempts to establish Hungarian in secondary schools and although Hungarian was very much the vernacular language, none of this sufficed. It was in the late nineteenth century and during the great spurt of industrialisation, when Magyar and non-Magyars flocked to the cities and the factories, that national assimilation took place. It was not because of coercion as alleged by so many historians and which caused Hungary so much grief at Versailles-Trianon.<sup>12</sup> It is even possible that, without a Gellner at their elbow, the Great Powers at the end of World War I could not recognise in Magyar industrialisation and therefore nationalism what they had been undergoing a scant century or so earlier.

In fact, my defence of the nation-state as the most viable form of national government and unit of international relations to date begins precisely with the results of Versailles, Trianon and Sèvres. The Allies, in their determination to establish the so-called cordon de securité, allowed the Wilsonian principle of self-determination to go quite overboard in Central Europe and the Balkans. They established what they imagined would be best for their own security. As soon as World War II began, in fact before, the cordon collapsed in Eastern Europe. It was re-established by the Soviet Union at Yalta and elsewhere. With the implosion of the Soviet Union, in some cases as a result of much blood-shed and elsewhere quite peacefully, we find ourselves in a Central Europe and Balkans with a map remarkably similar to the one that preceded World War I.<sup>13</sup> Czechoslovakia no longer exists, however, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are doing remarkably well. Of the remnants of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Slovenia is doing extremely well, Croatia is doing much better, Serbia is getting

better, and the rest are still trying to resolve their various differences. On the other hand, Hungary, a homogenous nation-state is doing superlatively well, so is Poland. Of the economically relatively poor nations, Bulgaria is doing very well, whilst even Romania, despite misrule and revolution, is holding her own. Is this because the nation tends to survive ideology superimposed upon it with whatever force? I like to think so.

However, of the maps drawn rather arbitrarily, in terms of colonial interest on the eastern remains of the Ottoman Empire (the Middle East) after World War I, none of the same can be said. By no Gellnerian or other criterion could any of the disparate tribes living in a semblance of co-existence under Ottoman rule have been called a nation. That the borders so-drawn remain points of friction is a matter of recent history and that these continue to retain the potential for causing imminent conflict is a matter of fact.

More pressingly obvious to all of us are the actual events unfolding on television screens all over the world as I am writing this. We have, on the one hand, a fairly established nation state, Israel, enjoying quite a degree of affluence and a very sophisticated level of education joined in a high culture. Whether this was formed on religious bases or others are considerations beyond the scope of this essay. On the other, we have an aspiring nation state, Palestine, constantly desiring to be 'bullied by its own'. Again, the rights and wrongs of this conflict are beyond the scope of this essay. Yet, from a purely Gellnerian standpoint, it would be safe to assume that without mass deportations or genocide, suicide bombing will continue until certain aspirations are satisfied in reality.

In so many other parts of the world, we continue to see conflict in terms of nationality. Here the question is begged somewhat. How splintered can we get: if all the disparate groups that comprised Georgia each received a seat in the UN we would indeed be swamped. How feasible this mad rush, not toward mere autonomy but actual statehood, is shall no doubt be a question that shall beleaguer the world for some time. Yet, the difference between the *gemeinschaft* and the *gesellschaft* should indeed be kept in mind at this juncture. Meanwhile, let us not forget that Iceland with a population of a mere two hundred and fifty thousand souls is doing exceedingly well and has been for a very long time indeed.

My main concern in this short essay has been to make the case that the moral vilification meted to nationalism certainly is undeserved in terms of a Gellnerian analysis, since morality, let alone ethics, simply does not enter the equation in a *gesellschaft* nationalism, viewed as historical phenomenon with no actual agent directing it. It has also been my concern to point out the enduring nature of nations and the perils that abound in not taking them seriously enough.

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- 10 Ernest Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism*, op. cit. p. 115.
- 11 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, although the same terms are to be found in *Thought and Change*.
- 12 The most factual and therefore believable analysis of the post-Becsenyei nationalisation programme is to be found in C.A Macartney's, *Hungary and Her Successors*, Oxford University Press, 1965. For the real story of voluntary assimilation see Tibor Frank, 'Hungary and the Dual Monarchy' in Petr Sugar, et al. (eds.), *A History of Hungary*, Indiana University Press, 1994.
- 13 Gellner notes this particular point somewhat gleefully in *Encounters with Nationalism*.