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## NATIONALISM

There is a vision of mankind as divided naturally into non-overlapping groups, called nations, each nation enjoying its own single government, legal system, army, and church, each occupying a fixed and clearly delineated and continuous territory. The vision sees all persons living within each such territory as speaking a common language, reading the same newspapers, sharing a common history, racial origin, culture, and traditions, and it sees all of them as feeling loyalty towards, and as identifying themselves with, their nation for the very reason that these things are shared. This reason may be more or less explicitly formulated and more or less in correspondence with the facts. Were the vision to be realized in full – Iceland is the best example – then there would obtain a one-to-one correspondence between nations, states, languages, cultures, races, and territories. Nations, as constituted by the vision, must not be too large: they must embrace no mixtures of, for example, languages or cultures. But neither must they be too small: if necessary they must expand to accommodate all those who share a given language, culture, historical or racial origin.

The vision is – of course, according to which candidate national group one takes as one's starting point – to different degrees remote from reality. Yet it can none the less play an important political role. And however groundless the vision in a given case, it can unleash real and powerful forces which can be channelled both in positive and in negative directions.

Nationalism itself, now, is a rather loosely connected family of views which come to prominence wherever members of a group strive to realize or to preserve aspects of the vision, in many cases against a real or imagined external threat. Nationalism is therefore coeval with national consciousness, i.e. with a consciousness, dispersed throughout a given territory, of the supposed fact that these traditions, customs, etc., are in fact shared by all those who happen to be living within this territory.

The extent to which a national consciousness of this sort can become established depends upon the existence of an effective means of communication of a sort which will allow the dissemination and exchange of ideas across the entirety of a given territory. The church had long possessed a virtual monopoly of such means of communication and was thereby able to bring about a certain sort of supra-national consciousness which enabled it to serve at least to some degree as a check on other, more local political and military ambitions. With the rise of mass-production newspapers, however, and of the railway, all the speakers of a given language in a given territory began for the first time to be brought together into a single whole, and to be set apart as a whole from the speakers of other languages in other territories. The rise of the modern nationalist idea and of nationalism itself as an effective political force is therefore virtually simultaneous with these technical developments, which brought about also a decline in the importance of the church.

German philosophers, especially, contributed to the fixing of the idea, as they saw the separate political entities which made up the patchwork of separate German-speaking states as no longer constituting the most natural or effective or rational unit of political organization. The possibility of a realization of the vision and of the creation of a German nation to match that of the English and the French gave great impetus to the nationalist idea. Multinational empires such as that of the Habsburgs began to seem anachronistic and were successively brought down, in part by nationalist agitations among their constituent groups, despite the fact that, as subsequent history has shown, many of these groups did not themselves come close to promising a viable realization of the nationalistic vision.

The conservative, now, is likely to see many of the moments constitutive of the nationalistic vision – religious and linguistic unity, common traditions, shared loyalties, a feeling of common identity, etc. – as well as their associated images and symbols as important sources of value in their own right. Conservative nationalism is a political attitude which can arise wherever the vision is realized locally to a high degree, and it is an attitude which will tend to make itself felt in a forceful way to the extent that the vision is threatened by either internal or external forces.

Conservative nationalism is tied intrinsically to the vision itself; it is a nationalism of a type which depends exclusively on the formal characteristics of a nation as such, as embodied within the vision. Liberal nationalism, on the other hand, is a type of nationalism which depends strictly upon a specific sort of realization of the vision. It can come to expression as a political attitude only where the vision is realized to a high degree among the members of a group which as a group embraces or puts a high value on the political and economic practices otherwise characteristic of liberalism as such. Liberal nationalism can accordingly come to expression only where these liberal practices have come to form part and parcel of the

customs and traditions which constitute the relevant national identity. It will tend to become forcefully expressed wherever liberal practices are threatened by internal or external forces: appeals to national identity can then form part of the effort to defend these practices and therefore also liberalism itself.

Liberalism, then, in contrast to conservatism, has little to do with nationalism as such, except as a potential instrument of its own furtherance, and the liberal is accordingly unlikely to place a high value on those movements which are characteristic of national identity. An intrinsic connection between liberalism and nationalism could be established only if it could be proved either that a liberal political and economic order would be particularly conducive to the realization or preservation of the vision in some given locality, or that the vision itself is conducive to liberalism. Both alternatives are, however, ruled out, above all by the fact that liberalism tends to encourage phenomena – such as the free movement of peoples – which are detrimental to the national idea.

The different political attitudes within the wider family of nationalisms reflect the different ways in which the vision may, in a given locality, fail to be realized completely. It may be, first of all, that a given candidate national grouping lacks a corresponding state, a state of its own, with true political power. The term 'nationalism' is nowadays perhaps most closely associated with the strivings to bring about a correspondence between nation and state, strivings which will almost certainly always be with us, given that the vision is so unevenly realized throughout the world. (Consider Serbian, Ukrainian, Palestinian, and Kurdish nationalism.) It may be that what would otherwise be natural national groupings are mixed together within a given territory, or that their territories overlap, and again, 'nationalism' will then be employed to denote the strivings to bring about a state of affairs which will seem more ordered from one or other perspective. It may be that a given putative national grouping has no clearly delineated or continuous (or militarily defensible) territory and seeks to expand or fill in the gaps in its territory to the point where such boundaries would be reached, or to create *Lebensraum*, even at the expense of surrounding groups. In the period before the nationalist vision took hold in its modern form, this process was often extended by sheer military momentum beyond the stage where a given group had reached what might count as natural borders. Imperialism, in this sense, preceded nationalism, and lost much of its attraction, and justification, with the growth in importance of the nationalist vision.

A putative national grouping may constitute a realization of the vision in all respects save that of, say, a shared religion, or language, or race, and it may then seem important to particular sub-groups within the larger group to strive to bring about by force a homogeneity of the relevant sort: to 'purify' the body of the state. Such phenomena are again nowadays

particularly characteristic of non-developed areas of the world. The extent to which the nationalist vision is able to give rise to forceful measures of this sort in the developed west seems to be declining, and is largely confined to incidental instances where particular groups can utilize national feeling in such a way as to bring about measures designed to penalize particular deviations from the prevailing norm for their own economic benefit.

Given that the spectrum of nationalities is full of interpenetrations, ambiguities, twilight zones, it must follow that the vision of a 'just' or 'natural' or even 'rational' order of nation states can be realized at best only locally, to a limited degree, and even then perhaps only for relatively limited periods of historical time. The very idea of a unitary nation state must thereby involve a factor of arbitrariness, a dimension of unintelligibility. For the more mystical conservative this unintelligibility can constitute a positive virtue. For the theoretical conservative or classical liberal, however, mindful of the havoc that has been so often wrought in human affairs by the nationalistic idea, the unrealizability of the vision ought to imply the need to consider more seriously other, alternative forms of political order. Federalism, pluralism (the existence of distinct and mutually competing levels of political competence), absentee government (of the sort that has for some time been enjoyed by Hong Kong), even imperialism, are forms of political order that have received little serious consideration from political philosophers, who have been blinded, in effect, by the exceptional purity of the nationalistic vision. Yet what political philosophers have put together they can also tear asunder, and it seems at least possible that such philosophers might one day succeed in assembling a sufficiently forceful justification of other kinds of order. Until then, it seems, it will be the proponents of the nationalistic ideology who will continue to dictate the terms within which contemporary political problems are conceived, whether in Ireland, in India, in the Lebanon, or in South Africa.

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#### Further reading

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