

Editor's Essay: The Return of the Nation

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Some years back, I used to teach a course on the history of Spain using Mark Williams's book *The Story of Spain*. The course's title included the word *Spain*, a word that, prima facie, should suggest the idea that I was instructing students on the subjective and emotional particulars that underpin the construction of a *nation*. Had it been my goal to focus solely on naked historical facts, I would have named the course *History of the Iberian Peninsula*. Consequently, I selected the *story* rather than the *history* of Spain because I've always assumed that, more so than a geographical space or a set of affective bonds, a nation *is* a story. It is a fable crafted to produce an emotional environment within which individuals, particularly those susceptible or sensitive to imaginary constructs, perceive themselves in a relationship of mutual dependence with a hypothesised community. An effective story will make people process the notional data made available to them and assign it an idiosyncratic meaning, one that implicates such data in a manner that is advantageous to communal cohesion and marshalled collective action. In this way, the social, political and economic environment will engage with the individual's consciousness after passing through the filter provided by the story's conceptual content. Given that the story has a subjective hierarchy of value, the particular elements of that external cosmos will be assessed and positioned in accordance with their value as catalysts in the process of imagining the nation.

So the nation is a construct sustained by a story that is designed to generate affinity-based association patterns; it is the type of fixed paradigm that allows individuals to sift and classify objective data and assign it a transcendent value that will harmonise with the story's plot. It is important to note that this paradigm is comparatively new.

Among some scholars and policymakers there still thrives the somewhat naïve assumption that those socio-political arrangements that we call "nations" have a long and illustrious history, that they have historic boundaries within which citizens have developed an endemic, distinctive culture, and that they represent a natural alignment of social forces. Yet the nation as a political entity is rather new. As Ernest Renan (1992/1882) described it at a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882,

[N]ations are something rather new in history. Antiquity did not know them: Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no sense nations. They were herds led by a child of the Sun or of the Sky. There were no Egyptian citizens, no more than there were Chinese ones. Classical antiquity had its republics and its municipal kingdoms, its confederations of local republics, its empires; it hardly had a nation in the sense that we understand it. Athens, Sparta, Sidon, and Tyr were small centres of admirable patriotism but they were cities with relatively restrained territory. Prior to their absorption into the Roman Empire, Gaul, Spain, and Italy were assemblages of peoples, often comprising leagues between themselves but without central institutions or dynasties. The Assyrian, Persian, and Alexandrine Empires also did not constitute fatherlands. There were never any Assyrian patriots; the Persian Empire was one great fief. Not a single nation finds its origins in Alexander's colossal adventure, otherwise so rich in consequences for the general history of civilization. (n.p.)

While the feeling of belonging to a community of individuals that share affinities might be ancient, it is also true that the contemporary concepts of nation and nationality that are common throughout the world crystallised during and following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a multi-ethnic state within which fifteen different languages were spoken. In October 31, 1918, the empire dissolved into separate, essentially ethnic precincts, an event triggered by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria at the hands of Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. In its wake, millions of Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Croats, Bosnians, Serbians, Italians, Czechs, Ruthenes, Slovenes, Slovaks and Romanians decided that peace and wellbeing would be more readily available to them if they resided within districts populated by people with whom they shared language, culture, mythologies and/or other significant and *distinctive* collective values and perceived physical traits. The XX century fall of Spanish, Portuguese, French, British, German and Belgian colonial empires also brought about a surge in nationalist feeling in formerly colonised, now independent regions. But commitment and loyalty to circumscribed and exclusionary collective ethes proved to be quite perilous: that century saw nationalism become a monstrosity, with World War I, Turkification, the Spanish Civil War and World War II causing widespread destruction and the designed extermination of millions of people who did not fit the nationalists' standardized description of their nations' citizens.

After World War II, with the proponents of globalization establishing universal moral and civic values likely to be disseminated around the world, it seemed like nationalism would fade away like the memory of a bad dream. In his 1989 essay "The end of history?" Francis Fukuyama went as far as to suggest that liberalism had triumphed over nationalism, and that the nation as we've known it was, or would soon be, a thing of the past. He has had to pull back from his previous position, trying to explain the bewildering and unanticipated rise of nationalists like Putin, Modi, Erdogan and Trump and the garish sabre-rattling that accompanies their hazardous rhetoric.

It is understandable that the Irish, for example, would take the nationalist road when confronting a foreign power that had been so harmful, for so long, to people on the island. At that historical moment, nationalism may have been the only way to marshal the energies of a group large enough to have a chance to break colonial fetters. The same may be said of Latin American and African nationalisms. But the troubling aspect of nationalists, as I see it, is that in their efforts to describe the confines of the nation they must, by necessity, also define the characteristics of people, often guiltless and inoffensive, who must be excluded from the state they envision. Nationalism, be it Catalan or Trumpist, is a rigorous drawing of lines meant to separate those who will be embraced by a described collective from those who will not. This is a fact, despite claims to the contrary by proponents of "liberal" or "civic" nationalism: In their view, a nation can be defined by shared moral and ethical values of freedom, tolerance, equality, and individual rights. Such poppycock asks us to abandon our powers of rational discernment and believe that a community such as a nation can be formed on the basis of shared attitudes toward social values. Along these lines, every sincere and honourable Central American that can demonstrate a devotion to those values must be recognised as a US national and should be allowed to clamber up the border wall without further restraint. Additionally, the millions of US citizens that do not share those values must be catapulted over the wall to the "other" side.

In this regard, it would probably be safe to say that Scotland and England both ground their political narrative and legal systems upon nearly identical moral and ethical principles, as outlined in civic nationalist theories. Yet Scottish nationalists want to break from the UK

while characterising their brand of nationalism as “civic” rather than “ethnic”, such that a Scot is merely someone living in Scotland, regardless of ethnic background or of any categorising trait. This begs the question: Why then bother to erect an international border between Scotland and England? Would a hard boundary along the Cheviot Hills make Scotland *free*? Free of what?

By its very nature, nationalism *excludes*; the silo mentality that distinguishes it from progressive principles places individuals within imaginary “affinity assemblages” whose commonalities have nothing to do with social values. Nationalism aims to insure that no external forces demolish the invented, fantasy barricades it establishes to circumscribe its imagined community; accordingly, it needs to design a positive image for the favoured group, while proposing a negative one for those that are excluded. To this end, often times a sort of demonology is developed to depict people outside nationalism’s imaginary assemblages. This explains statements made by Catalan independence leaders like Quim Torra, who references DNA to explain who is a real Catalan, who lists Spaniards as “beasts” and has openly declared that Catalan identity is dissolving under the weight of the “immigrant avalanche”. Auspiciously, his statements have been labelled “dangerous and irresponsible” by the anti-racist organisation SOS Racism. And his attitude, needless to say, does little to advance the image of Catalan nationalism as “civic nationalist” (Rodríguez, 2018). Moreover, the ugly brawl to secede from Spain, a free, open democracy and one of the most liberal welfare states in Europe, requires an explanation that takes into account Torra’s manifest ethos.

The nation is a story. Like fables and tall stories, nationalist narratives are dependent on a particular disposition of the individual to accept fiction as a means to an end. To a reader of Jules Verne or Philip K. Dick the end is entertainment, while to a consumer of a nationalist fable the end is political. Few would question, for example, that in almost every respect (economic, political, social, military, technological) the United States is a great nation, and yet the mantra “Make America Great Again” has attracted the attention of a significant percentage of American voters, who put aside daily substantiation of the nation’s prominence in order to vote for the man who would accomplish such a superfluous feat. And retrieving that greatness begins by requesting billions of dollars from Congress to build a border wall, the most eloquent monument to the true nature of nationalism.

Resurgent nationalism is heedless of a forthcoming world in which cultural and geographic migration will be the norm. Yael Tamir (2019) still believes that nationalism can be rehabilitated and be made to assume more caring, liberal and tolerant features. Yet he seems unconvinced by his own analysis and appears reluctant fully to endorse the return of the nation. Thus, he issues an ominous forewarning:

As we enter the age of a new and caring nationalism, a warning should be aired. National partnerships that are profitable to some are dangerous to others. There is no solidarity without in-group favouritism, stereotyping, and other negative side effects of group membership. Nationalism can be tamed, but it cannot be constructed in ways that run counter to human nature and social psychology. The hope to have patriotism without flags, hymns and symbols and a sense of identity that by its very nature is inclusive contradicts everything we know about the way groups are formed. (p. 178)

In view of the proliferation of nationalist groups clamouring for redemption, the danger is that another conflagration, inspired by nationalistic fables, will be fatal to the concord and

goodwill that was presaged by social scientists and historians in the 1990s. To this day many politicians warn of the growing danger: In a speech in January 2019, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2019) of Germany characterised nationalism as “an ideological poison”:

To put it in a nutshell, nationalism is ideological poison that is no less poisonous in a new guise. We in Europe in particular should never forget this, but rather we will keep this memory alive and show that we have learned from our bloody history, especially that of the 20th century.

Nationalism, *bête noire* of progressives who’ve longed for a new era of pluralism, equity and tolerance, is coming back with a vengeance, promoting eccentric politicians and creating division and marginalisation.

A tiger cannot change its stripes.

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