

ANGEL OF HISTORY AND PATRON SAINT OF NATIONALISM: THE ORIGINS OF THE NATION-STATE

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Few descriptions of the past have been as idealized as traditional accounts of the origins of Western nationalism. As a product of the eighteenth-century revolutions, initial European nationalism was lauded as a liberal form of mass political engagement and allegiance to the secular power of emerging states, consistent with popular rule. Accordingly, its birth was announced with the representation, rights, and toleration of England's constitutional monarchy and its banner the "liberty, equality and fraternity" of the French Revolution against absolutism. Nationalism in the West thus supposedly emerged as a unifying mass sentiment and participation. Specifically, it is usually portrayed as popular cohesion and loyalty to a state or inspiring efforts to build a state that conforms to such solidarity. And such solidarity has been conventionally described and celebrated as tending toward inclusiveness within a territorial political unit. Though some groups may not have enjoyed equal treatment as members of these nations, such exclusion was often ignored or described as temporary or tangential to an overriding tendency toward inclusion.

This Whiggish triumphalism was an inheritance of the purported founding of nationalism in the West during the Enlightenment, with nationalism seen as the quintessential expression of inclusive tolerance. And this image was then often reinforced by a distinction between the West's "civic" nationalism and illiberal "ethnic" nationalism that emerged later or elsewhere: the conflict-ridden and exclusionary efforts at non-Western or more recent nation-building, as in eastern Europe or Africa, have been denigrated and distinguished from the Western experience. As the central organizing principle of modern politics, nationalism was thus dichotomized between a noble Western invention and an ignoble non-Western imitation.

Even as this self-serving distinction of inclusive Western solidarity and others' violent exclusions has come under increasing scholarly criticism, it retains its hold on the popular Western imagination. There is no denying that new or resurgent efforts to consolidate nation-states have often been violent and exclusionary. And as we have painfully witnessed at the dawn of this

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millennium, non-Western efforts to challenge the existing dynamics of the nation-state system and to build regional, cultural, or global alternatives to it have also been violent and sought solidarity on the basis of antagonism. Both of these seemingly contradictory trends—to consolidate late-emerging nationalism or to move beyond it—impel further analysis of nationalism. If we are to grapple with the continued resonance of the nation-state, reject it, or replace it, we must understand what nationalism is and how it did and does develop. But the convention that the West's own initial experiences with nationalism followed a path consistently distinct from more recent developments, still stands in the way of a more complete understanding.

Hagiography of the West should be put aside, or at least be subject to further critical analysis, if we are to seriously inquire into what nationalism is and how it has emerged or been challenged. If western Europe was where nationalism developed in its earliest and supposedly inclusive "civic" form, then that is where the accuracy of this image would have to be assessed and where this "civic" path and motivation would be clearest. Or, put negatively, to argue that nationalism did not emerge as consistently liberal, comparative logic suggests that the formative role of exclusions would have to be evident where the supposedly inclusive path had been forged. Either way, we must understand these early Western experiences if we are to have an accurate picture of whether or not nationalism has been or can be built inclusively even today. The alternative view of nationalism built on the basis of exclusions should be tested against the hardest cases, where a civic founding was purportedly enjoyed. And if there is counterevidence, then we must move beyond discredited conventional accounts to show when, where, how, and why early nationalism was built through exclusions. Only then can we account for varying patterns of civic inclusion or exclusion or reject such distinctions as falsely self-serving.

The processes and outcomes of the modern era of nationalism cannot be understood without connecting these to the pre-modern. Earlier religious conflict and intolerance were not mere relics, irrelevant to the supposedly civic or tolerant orders that would be built thereafter. Where intolerance forged national unity, it was on the basis that liberalism and democracy were built, with ongoing exclusions reflected therein. And where intolerance did not forge comparable national unity, liberalism and democracy did not emerge, posing its own difficulties. That the modern era would prefer to forget these connections, ignoring illiberal basis of liberalism, does not make them any less significant. Indeed, that earlier basis proved essential in what would come later, setting countries off on distinct paths. Without cognizance of the pre-modern, we cannot account for the modern or understand our inheritances.

Ironically, while accounting for the modern requires remembering the

pre-modern, the actual process of becoming modern seemingly required or at least encouraged purposeful forgetting. For national unity and then democracy to be further consolidated, past conflict and founding exclusions used to resolve that conflict were dismissed as irrelevant. Illiberal origins were repudiated by leading thinkers so as to reinforce the liberal image and reality of national unity. Earlier exclusions were played down by elites to foster an inclusive “imagined community.” And that sense of community was consolidated among the populace by forgetting the selective and violent means by which membership in it had been determined. Standard accounts for the emergence of nationalism as inclusive reinforced its consolidation. The modernizing effects of rising literacy, communication, and industrial development did indeed play a central role in later consolidating nationalism, but they also helped to spread and inspire efforts to forget its earlier basis.

And yet the legacy of past exclusions would not be fully forgotten; they would at least remain as *pentimento*, their shadow reemerging and their effects replayed in different forms later. Forgotten earlier processes of exclusion would still resonate and shape what would come later. Despite denials and formal commitments to liberal secularism, the glue of religious exclusion as a basis for domestic national unity has still not been fully abandoned. “God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority, have been a prevailing dualism of Western culture,” and yet this separation continues to be violated. Five of the fifteen members of the European Union, plus Norway, retain an established church. Only one member of the European Union (Portugal) has a constitutional “prohibition against political parties using religious affiliation or symbols...The only constitution of a member state...that explicitly calls its democracy ‘secular’ is France...But by 1959, in the most secular country in western Europe, the Debre Bill allowed for state support for teachers in Catholic schools. Indeed, by 1961, 20 percent of the total education budget in France was for Catholic private schools. France in the 1990s still had a separation of church and state; but, in political terms it had become a ‘friendly’ separation” (Stepan 214-22). More generally, France, England, and much of Europe also remain uneasy about inclusion of immigrant Muslims or racial minorities.

Not only would the exclusionary basis of unity continue to be evident at home in Europe but it would also be reflected on a larger scale in Europe’s international relations. By the nineteenth century, the image of unity, cohesion, and legitimacy of colonizing countries was reinforced by “the systemic and sustained political exclusion of various groups and ‘types’ of people.” Recapitulating earlier internal processes, imperial subjects were later excluded or denigrated, thereby further solidifying cohesion within the empire’s core. According to Lord Curzon in 1898, “imperialism is becoming everyday...more and more the faith of a nation.” Racial denigrating of colonial

subjects, for instance with disparaging images of “orientalism” or anti-Semitism, implied both unity and superiority of the colonizing nation (Mehta 5, 46). Colonizing nations in themselves and as a group were so unified in their projected superiority over subaltern “others,” reaffirming the image of internal European “civic” nationalism. This later application of derogatory exclusion to international relations further reinforced the ahistorical image of an inclusive core.

The cohering effect of exclusion and intolerance is still reflected in the West’s views of the rest of the world. Denigrating “others” as a basis of cohering “us” was not only central to the origins of Western nationalism and then justifications of colonialism. It is also recapitulated in our current denigration of latecomers to nationalism. Ironically, as western Europe now begins to move beyond national solidarities, its own coherence as a developed block is again solidified by distinguishing itself as more consistently civic than those others still fitfully forging national unity. Thus, “the West” is itself distinguished and thereby given coherence by denigrating “the rest” and by pretending that our own past was somehow different, mimicking the pattern by which our own earlier national-level solidarities were forged and then forgotten.

The West’s idealization of its past has indeed gone hand in hand with denigration of those who were encouraged, attempted, and failed to live up to that noble standard. Western “civic” nationalism has been contrasted with the “ethnic” or exclusionary forms later adopted by the East or South. Seeking their place in the modern world of national-states, much of Africa has been disparaged for its “tribalism,” while much of eastern Europe has been chided for its descent into ethno-religious Balkanization. Even in the West’s own core, violent ethno-nationalist movements have sprung up or continued among the Basques and Irish, while even Welsh and Scots pursue some degree of separatism. These current national builders have been criticized for distorting the supposedly noble invention of their priors and betters. “They” perverted and sullied what “we” inherited or designed and had offered as a positive model. The idea of nationalism was fine; others have distorted it.

But I hope to have suggested here that the ethnic conflicts and exclusions imbedded in recent nation-building are not fundamentally different from the processes of Western nation-building. The purposeful and cohering victimization of “others” today resembles on the global scale the domestic victimization of “others” in the West’s own past. Muslims in India, Tutsis in Rwanda, or Muslims in much of southeastern or Balkan Europe are the Jews, Moors, Huguenots, or Papists of our day. These and so many other groups have been sacrificed on the altar of collective solidarity, with their victimization central to the process of forging cohesion.

The early modern construction of nations apparently remains a template for its currently emerging successors, with countries today going through conflictual and exclusionary processes of nation-building resembling those western Europe experience earlier. We should therefore resist comparing currently exclusive efforts at nation-building with the West's modern, solidified, and inclusive nations. We should instead compare these recent efforts with the corresponding earlier and intolerant origins of Western nations. The faults imbedded in the West's own nation-building would then appear as more comparable to the flaws of later processes.

If we are then wrong in thinking that nationalism in the West began more inclusively than it would develop later or elsewhere, there is a powerful implication. At the very heart of liberalism is an ugly secret: Supposedly inclusive nationalism was founded on the basis of violent exclusion, used to bound and forge the nation to whom rights would then be selectively granted. Democracy itself was so founded also on exclusions in demarcating the unit to which rights of citizenship would be granted. Founded on this basis, liberal democracy would then eventually serve as cover, with gradual enfranchisement hiding past exclusions and obfuscating that at the heart of liberalism is an illiberal determination of who is a member of the incorporated community and who is not.

Forgetting the ignoble foundations of Western nationalism and liberalism would then not only be inaccurate but also dangerous in having enticed latecomers to try to follow a path that was not and perhaps could not be so pursued. Despite later denials, the scars of past processes of conflict and exclusions have indeed remained and seeped through into the present, plaguing those who naively later sought and seek to embrace liberalism and nationalism without cognizance of its illiberal foundations and exclusions. As I have argued, Western nationalism began as nastily as elsewhere later, as a form of "tribalistic" coherence amid conflict. Such illiberal nation-building is comparable to the process by which recent efforts at nation-building have also all too often proceeded. The history of the emergence of nationalism during the last half millennium thus appears as less consistently positive across time and space. Our "models" of the past have not been distorted by others or latecomers whom we denigrate as much as they have been accurately recapitulated, with flaws in the original design of nationalism allowed to remain unquestioned. Having forgotten those flaws in our own past may be self-satisfying but has dangerously provided no warnings for successors, who still pay a great cost.

By misremembering our own history, we have been condemned to expect repetition of what did not happen in the first place. We look for an idealized image of the past to be confirmed by recurrence. And when others do not follow that path assumed to have previously proven effective and

ennobling, we are shocked and disapproving. We hold our disappointment against those who fall below a false standard, which we smugly believe our predecessors had met, though they had not. But as the mythic image of the past retains its hold, others still attempt to follow, drawn into unforeseen dangers, and are denigrated for their failure to repeat what did not happen and may not be possible. The result is an ongoing tragedy of huge proportions.

If we instead recognize our own earlier discord and exclusions, we will perhaps not be so quick to self-righteously condemn those who now similarly seek to build nations. Violence and exclusion are part of the inheritance we have provided. In the millennium we have just begun, if we have any hope of moving beyond the bloody past of the last half millennium of nation-building, then we must acknowledge the path from which we have come and from which we hope to learn and divert.

So arguing that nation-building exclusions and conflicts today resemble those of yesterday is in no way intended to minimize or excuse current (or past) tragedies. I am not suggesting that we should be more forgiving of such currently violent processes but rather that we should be more understanding that such discord is etched in the very nature of nation- and state-building. We should remember that “we” of the West were not unsullied by such self-imposed tragedy. This should help us understand but not excuse recent travails as the stuff of which national-level solidarities have long been built, with important implications for current efforts to build nations or move beyond nationalism. If we can be more honest and accurate in our appraisals of our own past and others’ present, then I hope we will be better positioned for dealing with both that past and that present. Failing to do so has already produced much tragic misunderstanding and recriminations.

If anything, the terrible processes by which large-scale solidarities have been and are built now threaten a tragedy of even greater proportions, already apparent in current global politics and conflict. In forgetting that our own domestic liberalism and democracy were forged on the bases of exclusion and illiberalism, we are intolerant toward the faults of others that may be more similar to our own faults than we care to admit. This may help to define and bind the West as such, but in disparaging others to consolidate ourselves we also encourage their sense of exclusion and aggravate conflict accordingly. The result has been dramatic resentment and terrible efforts by some in the non-West to in turn consolidate themselves and gain support in antagonism against the West. In other words, the West’s own earlier logic of using exclusion and denigration as a basis for mass engagement and solidarity is being turned against the West on a larger scale. And as the world now searches for alternatives to the nation-state, with peoples elsewhere increasingly demanding and expansion of the unit to which democratic processes might be