

What Nationalism Really Is (and Why It Matters)

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From President Donald Trump to the rise of new nationalist political parties in Europe to a general resurgence of the term in recent years, nationalism seems to be on the march.

Nationalism is a political movement that has made major inroads in recent years while preaching a message of immigration restrictionism, trade protectionism, and a stronger government devoted to defending citizens from (mostly) imaginary harms. But besides some policy positions and a style of governance, there is not a good working definition of nationalism widely used in popular discourse and there is almost no attempt to distinguish it from patriotism.

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My base assumption was that nationalism must be something more than crude jingoistic tribalism, but few ventured beyond that. Those reasons prompted me to read several thousand pages on the topic – and I learned quite a bit. Below are some lessons I learned and a useful taxonomy of different types of nationalism.

Patriotism v. Nationalism

The first thing I learned is that most research on nationalism is terrible. Most writers on this subject poorly define their terms or define them so broadly that they are meaningless. I wish I could go back in time and tell an earlier version of myself to skip lots of papers and books. Even worse, many scholars of nationalism are either critics or supporters of the concept, which forces them to make absurd statements like claiming that the National Socialist German Workers Party wasn't a nationalist political party. This makes it difficult for lay outsiders like myself to figure out what nationalism is.

The second thing I learned is that there is no simple division between patriotism and nationalism, but George Orwell's division probably comes closest when he wrote:

Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. Both words are normally used in so vague a way that any definition is liable to be challenged, but one must draw a distinction between them, since two different and even opposing ideas are involved. By 'patriotism' I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.

In other words, patriotism is love of country while nationalism is love of country combined with dislike of other countries, their peoples, or their cultures. Nationalism also extends to dislike of fellow citizens who are different, which is why nationalists frequently support nation-building

campaigns of government schooling to assimilate citizens to a state-determined norm, national languages, and other means of creating ethnic, religious, or other forms of uniformity.

5 Types of Nationalism

The third thing I learned is that there are at least five types of nationalism. Obviously, the nationalism of Edmund Burke or George Washington is different from the blood-worshipping nationalism of Adolf Hitler, but only the late American historian Carlton J.H. Hayes divides these types of nationalism into a useful five-part taxonomy:

1. **Humanitarian Nationalism:** An outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy influenced by Henry Bolingbroke, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, and Johann Gottfried Herder, who all emphasized local self-rule through democratic forms of government based on the peculiar characteristics of each nation (body of people), as opposed to the large multi-ethnic empires that then dominated Europe.
2. **Jacobin Nationalism:** A state ideology adopted by the revolutionary French government to solidify its hold on power. Its four characteristics were suspicion and intolerance of internal dissent, heavy reliance on force and militarism to attain government goals, fanatical support for the state, and a missionary zeal to spread their nation.
3. **Traditional Nationalism:** A brief nationalist reaction to the Jacobins in favor of the *status quo ante* bellum. This is the most conservative type of nationalism. Edmund Burke, Friedrich von Schlegel, and Klemens von Metternich were the most well-known supporters of this brief style of nationalism. This form of nationalism did not survive long, as the cultural changes begun by the Industrial Revolution undermined it.
4. **Liberal Nationalism:** This style of nationalism is midway between the Jacobin and Traditional varieties. It emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of the national state but, in seeming contradiction, also seeks to limit the power of the government to interfere with individual liberty by proclaiming the goal of the state to be to protect individual liberty and provide public goods. If you have ever taken an economics class, the ideal of liberal nationalism comes closest to what economists think of as the proper role of the state. If you also see the tensions between absolute sovereignty and the protection of individual liberties, then the next phase of nationalism should be unsurprising.
5. **Integral Nationalism:** This stage of nationalism centers the nation and its state in the life of all citizens. Instead of a state being committed to supplying public goods to citizens, this form of nationalism emphasizes individual sacrifice for the benefit of the nation and its government. It also frequently embraces blood-worship (the Latin root of nationalism is *natio*, meaning tribe, ethnic group, or division by birth) and seeks to expand the state to include all co-ethnics living in other territories. Hayes summarized this form of nationalism as intensely “anti-individualistic and anti-democratic”, where all other loyalties are absorbed into loyalty to the national state and a right-makes-right ideology.

Imperialism, the French Revolution, and Deadly Nationalism

The fourth thing I learned is that imperialism is the highest stage of nationalism (not capitalism as Lenin thought), and is inseparable from Jacobin Nationalism, Integral Nationalism, Traditional Nationalism, and probably from the other varieties as well. Nationalists seek to

expand their nations, and imperialism was one way to accomplish that goal. Many of the liberal nationalists of the 19th century expanded their colonial empires, while the integral nationalists went even further.

The fifth thing I learned is how linked the French Revolution is to the rise of nationalism. Most writers, especially conservatives, write off the French Revolution as a mad left-wing Jacobin craze that swept away institutions and traditions in favor of worshipping reason. Those things were part of the French Revolution and its chaotic aftermath, but it was also a deeply nationalistic revolution and movement, honed by the Ancien Regime's creation of a "cult of the nation" in an attempt to lower the cost of military conscription in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is entertaining to see modern conservatives criticize the French Revolution on one hand while embracing an eerily similar form of Jacobin Nationalism on the other in their recent flirtations with populism.

It's time we all start criticizing nationalists for their ideology's not-as-bad-but-still-evil legacy of brutality.

The sixth thing I learned is that nationalism is the second deadliest political ideology of the 20th century after communism. The late political scientist RJ Rummel estimated the number of people killed by different governments over time. Communist governments killed about 150 million people in his estimation. Nationalists killed about 92 million. Those 92 million include those killed by the Chinese Nationalists, Japanese Nationalists, Turkish Nationalists, and by the European Nationalists in the colonial era. I excluded slaughters committed by pre-communist Russians, Mexicans, and Pakistanis, as they were less outwardly nationalistic than the other regimes.

American conservatives and libertarians frequently, loudly, and rightly criticize Communists for their ideology's legacy of slaughter. It's time we all start criticizing nationalists for their ideology's not-as-bad-but-still-evil legacy of brutality.

Some nationalists, like Thierry Baudet, are seeking to redefine nationalism in nonsensical ways such as claiming that nationalists can't be imperialists which, if true, would mean that the age of European nationalism could not have begun until about 1997, when decolonization was largely complete. Regardless, the brutal humanitarian legacy of nationalist governments is something that serious nationalist thinkers must grapple with, rather than attempting to change definitions as communists do when they claim that the Soviet Union wasn't really communist in an attempt to excuse its crimes.

Nationalism is a simple and relativist political ideology that holds tremendous sway with millions of voters and many governments. Nationalism's adaptability to most local conditions allows it to thrive, especially when supported by a government intent on expanding its own power domestically and internationally. It's an attractive ideology for political leaders, as it provides a ready-made and widely-believed justification for increased political power in order to Make the Nation Great Again.

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