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LIBERAL NATIONALISM

As we entered the final quarter of the twentieth century, there was a widespread assumption that the age of nationalism was over, that we were on the threshold of a postnational era. It is now clear that this assumption was wrong. National movements are regaining popularity, and nations that had once assimilated and "vanished" have now reappeared. Estonians, Latvians, Corsicans, and Lombards awake from the long slumber that communist regimes or Western European nation-states had forced upon them, flex their muscles, and set out to march under the banner of national independence.

Unfortunately, such attempts to turn back the historical clock are often marked by bloodshed and violation of the rights of neighboring nations. In their enthusiasm to regain their national identity and acquire recognition and self-respect, national activists often overlook the changes that have taken place in the surrounding political, economic, and strategic circumstances, and fail to realize that ethnocentric national slogans have become obsolete. The era of homogeneous and viable nation-states is over (or rather, the era of the illusion that homogeneous and viable nation-states are possible is over, since such states never existed), and the national vision must be redefined.

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At first glance, the task of redefining nationalism might seem unpromising from a liberal perspective. The national tradition, with its emphasis on belonging, loyalty, and solidarity, would seem to be fundamentally opposed to the liberal tradition, with its respect for personal autonomy, reflection, and choice. Indeed, some would argue that liberals should engage in a struggle against the national phenomenon, offer a universalist alternative, and rely on persuasion and education to eradicate national feelings.

At first glance, the task of redefining nationalism might seem unpromising from a liberal perspective. Indeed, some would argue that liberals should engage in a struggle against the national phenomenon.

Such an enterprise might be justified were we to agree that national aspirations are inherently evil and there is nothing in them that merits our respect. Karl Popper, in what is probably the best-known attack on nationalism, endorsed such a view when he claimed that nationalism is akin to a revolt against reason and the open society — that it appeals "to our tribal instincts, to passion and to prejudice, and to our nostalgic desire to be relieved from the strain of individual responsibility which it attempts to replace by a collective or group responsibility."

But there are problems with the liberal tendency to describe nationalism as resting merely on irrational (some say primitive) fears of the stranger, as motivated by a morally irrelevant attraction to what is familiar and similar, or as simply giving expression to an unscrupulous desire for power. National existence may instead be founded on a range of perceptive understandings of the human situation, of what makes human life meaningful and creative, as well as a set of praiseworthy values. No doubt there are inherent tensions between certain national values and those of the liberal tradition. But the two modes of thought are not irreconcilable at all points, and the existence of tensions does not imply that we must engage in the ultimate pursuit of one set of values at the expense of the other. A theory of liberal nationalism renounces such absolute solutions, above all by seeking to mediate between the nationalist belief that individuals are the inevitable product of their culture, and the liberal conviction that individuals can be the authors of their own lives.

Constructing National and Personal Identity

Liberal nationalism, like all political ideologies, begins with a conception of human nature. The belief that such a conception is possible — that there are universal features that characterize human beings — might initially seem more plausible to liberals than to nationalists. Yet the nationalist emphasis on the importance of particular circumstances for the construction of personal identity does not contradict the universalist view of human nature. On the contrary, nationalists can endorse this notion and claim that, by nature, individuals are members of particular human communities. Outside such communities, individuals cannot develop a language and a culture, or set themselves aims. There is no substance to their reflection, no set of norms and values in the light of which they can make choices and become the free, autonomous persons that liberals assume them to be.

The definition of individuals as social beings does not seem to evoke strong controversy. But there are different ways of understanding the links between communal membership and personal identity. Being situated, adhering to a particular tradition, and being intimate with a particular language, may be seen as restricting the possibility of choosing elements that are constitutive of personal identity, such as communal and cultural affiliations and a basic set of values. On the other hand, communal membership may also be seen as affording the *preconditions* for personal autonomy. Would national, religious, and cultural movements be so fearful of conversion and assimilation were it not clear that individuals do indeed have a choice in these realms?

Liberal nationalism holds that neither our moral nor our communal identities are wholly prescribed for us by our history and our social affiliations. As moral agents, individuals who are exposed to alternative ways of life, belief systems, and sets of norms are capable of responding by reconsidering their own. Or, following a less radical process, they may challenge the conventional understanding of the basic social norms and values prevalent in their society in terms advocated by these same values. In such instances, the motivation for reflection and change is rooted in tensions and inconsistencies internal to the system. Here reflection might lead to a reinterpretation of socially held norms and values, or to a broadening of their scope.

As for communal identity, individuals can assimilate into national communities other than the ones into which they were born (though full-scale assimilation is rarely possible); they can embrace the national identity of their forefathers, even though they might have been completely estranged from it; or they can choose to preserve their communal mem-

bership, not merely out of convention and routine, but as a result of reflection.

Imaginary Communities

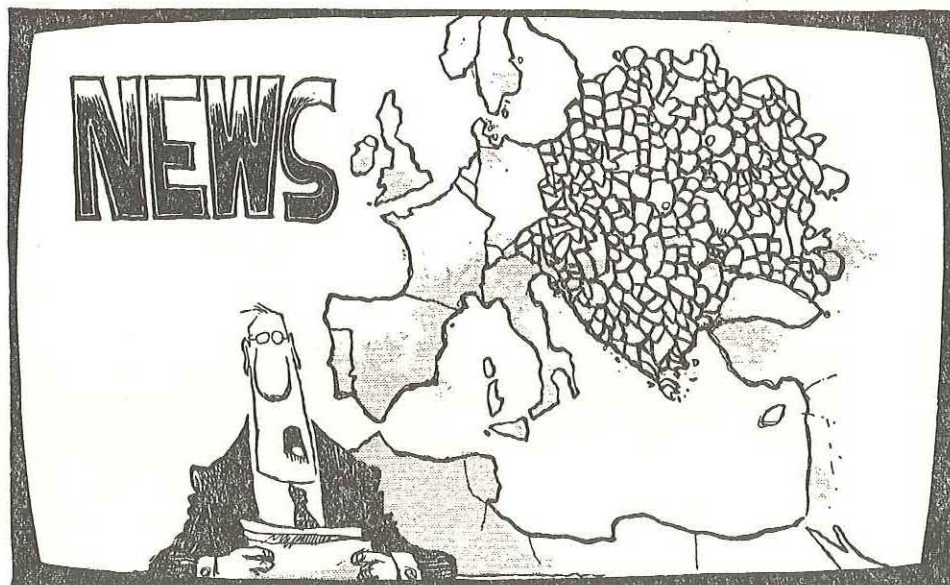
In emphasizing the elective aspect of personal identity, liberal nationalism affirms the right of individuals to exercise cultural choice — to lead lives which, on reflection, they have come to value, rather than lives imposed on them by history and fate. And yet, notwithstanding the individualistic dimension of this argument, liberal nationalism recognizes that culture and membership are communal features, whose worth can be fully enjoyed only together with others making similar choices. A right to culture thus entails the right to a public sphere in which individuals can share a language, memorialize their past, cherish their heroes, live a fulfilling national life.

This approach presupposes a cultural definition of the term "nation," in which the nation is seen as an "imaginary community." Imaginary communities, in Benedict Anderson's formulation, are those that are too large to allow for direct personal relations among all their members. The boundaries of such a community, and the notion of recognition that follows from it, are products of its members' ability to "think the nation" by the power of their imagination. Hence, instead of implying false beliefs or misrepresentations of reality, "imaginary" implies that, unlike the family, the tribe, or the people, the nation exists only

when its members consciously conceive themselves as distinct from members of other groups.

These feelings can of course change and bring about the destruction of nations or result in the emergence of new ones. Nations exist only as long as their members share a feeling of communal membership, and in this sense, Renan's metaphor, "an everyday plebiscite," accurately captures the important role of "the will to belong" in the definition of a nation.

In the modern era, nation-builders have not always acknowledged the role of choice in sustaining national identity. Insisting that their nation is a natural community shaped entirely by history and fate, they compulsively search for ancestral origins to which the new nation might "return," cling to even the faintest testimony of historical continuity, and advance patently false claims locating the nation's roots in a distant past. By emphasizing the link to the past, nation-builders try to play down the fact that their nation is the outcome of a bureaucratic decision or an international agreement and that its national consciousness is only beginning to take shape. Nevertheless, in their attempts to project their idea of a real nation — a group sharing a common denominator based on history, culture, language, and rituals — they express values that are central to national life generally: the urge for continuity, the desire to see at least some parts of social life as unchanging and invariant, and the need for a locus of identification.



"EASTERN EUROPE SUBDIVIDED AGAIN TODAY...."

*Jim Borgman/Cincinnati Enquirer
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Liberal nationalism does not oppose such sentiments. To the contrary, it recognizes that many elements of the nationalist ethos, although unacknowledged, have long been fused into liberal thought. For example, the liberal conception of distributive justice is particularistic and applies only within well-defined, relatively closed social frameworks, which favor members over nonmembers. The same applies to the liberal conceptions of membership and political obligations. These conceptions simultaneously embody two contradictory images of the politi-

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cal community: that of a voluntary association and that of a community of fate. Liberal nationalism, in its understanding of national and personal identity, embodies a similar contradiction, arguing that although cultural choices are neither easy nor limitless, cultural memberships and moral identity are not beyond choice.

The Nature of Cultural Membership

In the past, the version of nationalism that places cultural commitments at its center has usually been perceived as the most conservative and anti-liberal form of nationalism. Cultural nationalism, it has been argued, preaches the establishment of closed societies, favors the authoritarian uniformity of state and faith, and fosters xenophobia.

But although liberal nationalism emphasizes the role of culture in constituting nations, it does not claim that individuals can find true freedom and expression only through complete identification with the community. From a national perspective, a painter working in the solitude of his atelier, the poet writing to his loved one, and the athlete competing in a sports event, strive for the pinnacle of their own individual achievements, even as they contribute to the advancement of their own particular nations. Moreover, if we accept Raymond Williams' claim that "culture is the ordinary" — the language we teach our children, the bedtime stories we tell them, the lullabies we sing to them — then the meaning of most of our daily actions transcends their particular and direct function. The ability to turn an everyday act into a source of national pride is one of the most appealing aspects of nationalism. It contextualizes human actions, no matter how mundane, making them part of a continuous creative effort whereby culture is made and remade.

The Morality of Community

In placing reflection, choice, and internal criticism at its center, liberal nationalism rejects the notion that nationalism must necessarily, in Gordon Graham's words, "exalt the idea of the nation above all other ideas." It is true that nationalism implies a morality of community — a belief that we are justified to some degree in favoring the interests of fellow members over those of nonmembers. However, liberal nationalism recognizes that modern individuals belong to a complex network of memberships, and therefore argues that a morality of community need not be as xenophobic as it might appear at first glance.

For example: I see myself as an Israeli, but I am also a member of an academic community and therefore committed to the notion of academic freedom. I therefore have a duty to support Palestinian colleagues in their struggle to reopen the universities closed by the Israeli Army in the West Bank. Obviously, the duty to defend academic freedom is a general duty, but the fact that I am a member of the academic community and share this membership with members of other nations intensifies my duty to defend their interests. Hence, I am less troubled by the fact that brokers at the Israeli stock exchange failed to organize a sit-down strike in solidarity with Palestinian academics, than by the fact that no Israeli university has officially done so.

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Liberal nationalism insists upon fostering national ideals without losing sight of other human values against which those ideals ought to be weighed. It celebrates the particularity of culture together with the universality of human rights. In this sense it differs radically from organic interpretations of nationalism, which assume that the identity of individuals is totally constituted by their national membership, and that the personal will is "truly free" only when submerged in the general one. It is a direct descendant of the cultural pluralism of Herder and the liberal nationalism of Mazzini.

National Self-Determination and Individual Liberty

The demand for a public sphere in which the cultural aspects of national life come to the fore constitutes the essence of the right to national self-determination. In the past, the full exercise of this right has often been identified with the creation of a homogeneous nation-state. Many nineteenth-century liberals favored the establishment of such states because, in Hugh Seton-Watson's words, they believed that "individual liberty and national independence or unity would go together," and that liberal principles generally could best be implemented in a unitary state. "Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities," argued John Stuart Mill. "Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist."

However, as Mill had already noted in 1861, there are major difficulties in implementing the national ideal of a state for each nation. The most prominent obstacle is the geographic one: there are areas of the world where members of different nations are so closely intermingled that it is impossible to grant each an independent nation-state.

This would have been particularly true in light of the interpretation of national self-determination pre-

vailing in Mill's time and extending into the Wilsonian era. National self-determination was perceived, Eric Hobsbawm writes, as a stage in the social evolution of human units as they developed from "family and tribe to county and canton, from the local to the regional, the national and eventually the global." As long as national self-determination was expected to be part of a linear process of historical evolution leading to increasingly larger social units,

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the idea that it should be granted not just to *unifying* national movements, but also to groups wishing to *secede* and create their own small, homogeneous national units, was ruled out a priori (though Mill himself made some exceptions). Thus, even in Western Europe, the cradle of nationalism, many citizens continue to see themselves as members of national minorities living in a state that does not fly their flag.

The nineteenth-century hope that individual liberty and national independence would go together has also failed to materialize. In fact, the yearning for national self-determination is different from, and may even contradict, the liberal democratic struggle for civil rights and political participation. History shows that individuals often desire to secure status and recognition for their nation even at the cost of relinquishing their civil rights and liberties.

The U.N. Human Rights Committee has viewed the realization of the right to national self-determination as an essential condition for the effective guarantee and observance of individual rights. But members of nations granted national self-determination can, and indeed have, set up regimes that restrict the human rights of their fellow nationals, while individuals sometimes enjoy a full range of civil rights even when not governed by their fellow nationals. Members of national minorities who live in liberal democracies — the Quebecois and the Indians in Canada, the aborigines in Australia, the Basques in France — are not deprived of their right to political participation or their freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, although they may feel marginalized and dispossessed because they are governed by a political culture and political institutions imprinted by a culture not their own.

Liberal Nationalism

Yael Tamir

"This is a most timely, intelligent, well-written, and absorbing essay on a central and painful social and political problem of our time."

—Sir Isaiah Berlin

"In this remarkable book, Yael Tamir seeks and finds a 'decent' compromise between liberal and nationalist policies. But her real achievement is a critical theory of nationalism, which explains why the compromise is morally necessary. Working through historical and contemporary examples, Tamir describes the value of national commitments and defines their moral limits. She explores a set of problems that philosophers have been notably reluctant to take on, and leaves us all in her debt."

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Individuals wish to be ruled by institutions informed by a culture they find understandable and meaningful. When they are able to identify their own culture in the political framework, when the political institutions reflect familiar traditions, historical interpretations, and norms of behavior, individuals come to perceive themselves as the creators, or at least the carriers, of a valuable set of beliefs. Fortunately, the right to a public sphere where one's national culture may find expression may be achieved through a variety of political setups, including federative and confederative arrangements, local autonomies, or the establishment of national institutions. Were the creation of a separate nation-state the only way of realizing the right to national self-determination, its implementation would remain the privilege of only a fortunate few.

The Universality of National Rights

Liberal nationalism holds that because national rights rest on the value that individuals attach to their membership in a nation, all nations are entitled to equal respect. The justification of national rights is thus separated from the glorious or tormented past of each nation, from its antiquity, or from its success in attaining territorial gains. Because liberal nationalism is predicated upon a commitment to the existence of national groups as such, it insists that a nation can affirm its identity without disregarding the dignity and value of other nations.

This conception is well expressed in the writings of the Polish revolutionary Kazimierz Brodzinski, who insisted that national egoism, wherein each nation regarded itself as "the goal and center of everything," had to be replaced with a liberal perspective. Brodzinski's writings convey the extraordinary combination of particularistic pride and universal commitment typical of the progressive-romantic version of liberal nationalism prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century Europe:

the Polish nation alone (I say it boldly and with patriotic pride) could have a foreboding of the true movement of the moral universe. It has recognized that every nation is a fragment of the whole and must roll on its orbit and around the center like the planets around theirs.

Brodzinski promoted the idea of the brotherhood of nations, which shared a sacred duty to be mutually helpful in the struggle for freedom and international justice. It is in this spirit that Mazzini addresses his fellow Italians:

A people, Greek, Polish, Circassian, raises the banner of the Fatherland and of Independence, fights, conquers, or dies for it. What is it that makes your hearts beat at the story of its battles, which makes them swell with joy at its victories, and sorrow over its defeats? ... And why do you eagerly read the miracles of patriotic love recorded in Greek story, and repeat them to your children with a feeling of pride, almost as if they were stories of your own fathers?

Ethnocentric nationalists, who rely on arguments exclusively related to one particular nation, rule out a universal justification of national rights and lose the ability to hold a meaningful dialogue with members of other nations. This limitation is one that the tradition of liberal nationalism seeks to overcome.

The aspiration of creating an independent state for each nation must be replaced with more modest solutions. Were the creation of a separate nation-state the only way of realizing the right to national self-determination, its implementation would remain the privilege of only a fortunate few.

A Postnational World?

Recent versions of nationalism seem to lend little credibility to the liberal nationalist position I have offered. Witness the bloody struggles in Yugoslavia, the violent clashes between Sikhs and Hindus in India, and the frequent outbursts of ethnic hatred within and between the new republics of Eastern Europe. A cursory glance at the surrounding reality could easily lead to the conclusion that liberal nationalism is a rather esoteric approach.

Yet there are reasons to think otherwise. Since the end of the Second World War, independent nation-states have agreed to restrict their autonomy, and cross-national economic cooperation — involving the development of joint policies, effective regulations, and continuous coordination — seems to have become the order of the day. Some observers assume that such cooperation will necessarily lead to a postnational world. But one can imagine nations enjoying the right to national self-determination along with the benefits accruing from membership in broader political alliances — especially if, as liberal nationalism proposes, the aspiration of creating an independent state for each nation is replaced with more modest solutions, such as local autonomies or federative or confederative arrangements.

Many of Europe's small nations, which failed to establish independent nation-states, look forward to European unification. The Corsicans, Basques, Catalans, and Irish nationalists assume that, as a self-professed multinational entity, the EC will not seek to shape a homogeneous cultural community, nor will it follow the undesirable tradition in which international organizations include only states. The EC could become a community of nations that openly recognizes the diversity of its constitutive units.

On the other hand, as technological development and economic prosperity increasingly depend on cross-national associations, assimilation is, more than ever, a feasible option. This could mean that the real test for cultural and national affiliations has arrived. Will national groups accede to pressures to melt together into a larger culture, or will they be motivat-

ed to invest in the preservation of their own cultural heritage, their language, their distinctiveness?

Individuals may, in the future, choose to surrender their particularities and assimilate into one international culture. But the need for mediating communities makes this scenario unlikely. As Mazzini rightly argued, "the individual is too weak and Humanity is too large."

— Yael Tamir

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Disability, Discrimination, and Fairness

It is widely agreed that people with disabilities are treated unfairly in our society: that they are the victims of pervasive discrimination, and that they have been denied adequate accommodation in areas ranging from housing construction to hiring practices to public transportation. As Congress declared in enacting the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990:

[I]ndividuals with disabilities are a discrete and insular minority who have been faced with restrictions and limitations, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment, and relegated to a position of political powerlessness in our society.... [emphasis added]

Yet people with disabilities were largely bypassed by the civil rights revolution of the past generation. Congress found that "unlike individuals who have

experienced discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, religion, or age, individuals who have experienced discrimination on the basis of disability have often had no legal recourse to redress such discrimination."

The ADA is intended to provide that legal recourse. It requires employers, transit systems and public facilities to modify their operations, procedures, and physical structures so as to make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. The ADA recognizes broad exceptions in cases where these modifications would result in "undue hardship" or pose risks to third parties. But in principle, the statute treats the failure to ensure that people with disabilities have an "equal opportunity to benefit" from a wide range of activities and services as a form of discrimination.