

The Past and Present of Nationalism: How Opinions on Nationalism Changed

Sirou Zhu¹, Suyang Zhou²

¹Tang Wenzhi College, Soochow University, Suzhou, Jiangsu, 215123, China

²Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, Jiangsu, 215123, China

Abstract

Nationalism, which was believed to abate since the nationalist imperative of the congruence of political unit and culture has been achieved almost everywhere, is still one of the dominant ideologies in today's world. However, once viewed as a force for good, now nationalism is ill-reputed and many people think of it as the primary cause of international conflicts. This article will explain the reasons why opinions on nationalism have changed so dramatically. By exploring the definition and historical evolution of nationalism, we will see how it becomes the way it is right now, with self-determination as the primary goal, conspicuous exclusivity and more importantly, a special relationship with fascism, all of which contribute to people's misunderstanding towards nationalism. However, at a time when nationalism is still mounting around the world, it's worthwhile to find out the reason why it is still gaining momentum as well as to establish a correct attitude towards it. This article argues that there is no need to fear nationalism itself -- while it certainly isn't proper everywhere, it isn't everywhere improper. Instead, people should always be alert to those who abuse nationalism and the actions that may take it too far.

Keywords

Nationalism; Self-determination; Nationalism and Globalization.

1. Introduction

People nowadays have already embraced ideology as an integral part of their social and political life since it maps the world around them and no one can act without making sense of the world. Among all of them, there is a very special one, which as Berlin described, "dominated much of the nineteenth century in Europe and was so pervasive, so familiar, that it is only by a conscious effort of the imagination that one can conceive a world in which it played no part" [1], and that is nationalism.

Nationalism, which was once considered as a powerful tool for national self-determination and freedom as it expressed a nation's desire to rule itself, now has numerous critics. This article tries to find out why this ideology, once was believed as a force for good, is disdained by many these days.

To better analyse this question, this paper will first explore the definition of nationalism in order to underline culture and polity as two essence of nationalism and how self-determination became the primary goal of nationalism. Then it will trace the historical evolution of nationalism in Europe to see the way in which nationalism took on exclusive characteristics as well as how fascism affected people's feelings towards nationalism. The last part will focus on the current state of nationalism, including the problems nation-states have left and the rising tensions between globalization and nationalism in this unstable era.

2. Definition

There is no widespread agreement about the definition of nationalism. For Ernest Gellner, nationalism is a political principle holding that the cultural and historical community and the political manifestation of that community should become fused [2]. John Breuilly maintained that this political doctrine is based on three assertions: a nation with a peculiar character; the interests of this nation matter most; the nation must be as independent as possible [3]. Kedourie defines nationalism as “the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-determination” [4].

In view of these interpretations, nationalism seems to have very comprehensive meanings. However, there are two elements that are conspicuous in all the scholars' notion of nationalism: culture and polity. Nationalism demands cultural homogeneity, because a same system of ideas and ways of behaving lays the foundation of people's recognition of their shared membership of a nation. While at the same time, nationalist ideas often seek to achieve or sustain political sovereignty, asserting that the benefits of the nation supersede everything else.

Berlin once pointed out that the pre-modern ethnic affiliations or tribal feelings needed to be elevated into the conscious doctrine which could be recognized as a force and a weapon [1]. And the state, as an agency within the society which possessed great political power, pushed forward the development of Gellner's “linguistic high cultures”, Anderson's “print capitalism” and Breuilly's “institutions' essential role”, hence facilitating the transformation from pre-modern national awareness which was based on shared ancestry myths, history and culture to the nationalist ideas now we are familiar with. That's how culture and polity associated with each other and brought about modern nationalism.

It's not hard to find that the maintenance of national identity often depends on a state's sovereignty and independence. Without set of institutions specifically concerned with the division of labor and the enforcement of order, there's no guarantee for a nation's security and stability. And that's the reason why most of nations, from the Jews who have successfully founded their own state, to the Kurds who are still spread out across five nations, they all pursue one key objective, and that is the establishment of an independent state.

For a period of time after World War II, new countries were mostly liberated from colonies, while in the past forty years, large parts of the newly-established countries are those that become independent of original multi-ethnic states. That's why national self-determination, which was once regarded as a powerful tool for national liberation, has drawn massive criticism for being a political weapon to split the existing countries. This change can be largely attributed to the fact that there is no standardized criteria to separate the nations which deserve their states from those that do not. In fact, in order to legitimize their separatist movements, ethnic minorities in some countries try to prove that their ethnic groups used to be a relatively independent “nation” with a long history, and most of the time their arguments are not recognized by the government and other ethnic groups. But if we turn the question around, once this ethnic group has won its independence somehow, then will the international community use this set of “national history” as a evidence to prove the legitimacy of this new state? This is a question worth pondering.

By exploring the definition of nationalism, we can see that the primary goal of nationalism almost keep unchanged over the years; what changed was our uncertainty concerning nation as the sole source of legitimate authority.

3. The Development of Nationalism

Now we can move on to find out how nationalism was applied in the real world. Modern nationalism, which captured the imagination of the wider public, became a widespread political

belief during the 19th century in Europe, particularly the last third of the century. Nationalist ideas aroused by the French Revolution spread throughout Europe through Napoleon's conquest and hence turned into a main mobilising force in the modern political arena. However, the 19th and 20th century witnessed the rapid development as well as the growing destructive potential of it.

Nationalism was once supported by mainly the educated middle class, but in the end of 19th century, it became a mass phenomenon which had an international character thanks to the Europe's transformation from an agrarian society to an industrial one [4]. The demand for labor in industrial civilization pushed people to migrate and make a living far away from their birth place, prompting national communication and rethinking of self-belonging as well as contradiction and discrimination. The actual situation that different nations existed across borders and the consequent conflicts led to people's desperate needs for a powerful tool that could better unite "us" to fight against "them", and as an ideology, nationalism responded to these requirements perfectly. That was why nationalism gained great momentum during the 19th century, but was also the reason it took on exclusive and aggressive characteristics, fueling the hostility and antagonism already existed between different nations. As Gellner said, "the political effectiveness of national sentiment would be much impaired if nationalists had as fine a sensibility to the wrongs committed by their nation as they have to those committed against it" [2]. It's not hard to imagine how destructive nationalism as an ideology could be due to people's blind loyalty to their nation and irrational resentment towards other nations.

Moreover, one thing special about nationalism is that it can serve as the ideological tool for both the two sides of conflict. Like Zionism and anti-Semitism, although it's almost impossible to tell which one aroused the other in the very beginning, what is clear is that these two ideologies reinforced each other, making the situation of Europe more unstable.

By the 20th century, nationalism had developed to such an extent that it came to represent the willingness of paying any price, including the loss or even destruction of other nations, to advance national interests and benefits, with fascism taking this tendency to the extreme.

The relationship between nationalism and fascism played a significant part in people's attitude change in nationalism, from support to disapproval. However, the notion that fascism is the logical product of nationalism could be problematic. It's true that fascism has its root in nationalism and they share some similarities like exclusion [4], but greatly influenced by socialism, fascism weakens the value of the individual by demanding personal sacrifice for the country, while nationalism only emphasizes the dominance of national interests over others rather than the supremacy of nation over the individual. In this case, nationalism is relatively mild and thus can endure for a long time while fascism needs an opportunity to make people's self-awareness give way to that of the nation as well as a special social background to keep its attraction. After all, one's loyalty to his nation does not necessarily mean he is willing to let it ride roughshod over his natural rights, including his rights to life and freedom. It takes an outside force to turn from nationalism to fascism, and the turbulence as well as people's sense of disorder and helplessness caused by war usually prompted the rise of fascism. No one would deny that the outbreak of World War I and World War II benefited the expansion of fascism. It is during the inter-war that cultural anomie and political crisis of nations led to the rapid development of fascism in Germany, with millions of people willing to abandon their freedom in order to escape from solitude [5]. Therefore, we should not blame fascism on nationalism, but must be wary of the reasons why fascism gained currency, such as the huge disparity between the cruel reality and the national superiority and people's overall depressed mood after the first World War.

4. The Current State of Nationalism

Nationalism was once regarded as a passing phase in Europe, the end of which were predicted by many scholars. As it was believed, “nationalism, which was a pathological inflammation of wounded national consciousness, would abate because it was caused by oppression and would vanish with it [1].” Anthony Giddens argued that “nation-states only exist in systemic relations with other nation-states. The internal administrative coordination of nation-states from their beginnings depends upon relatively monitored conditions of an international nature” [6]. In view of these opinions, we may arrive at the conclusion that nationalism would still persist, but in a less virulent, stable form, unless some international crisis broke out.

However, in actuality, the world hasn't saw the end of outside oppression and wounded national consciousness, so nationalism in some areas are still mounting. Ethnic oppression and discrimination still exist, and thanks to the triumph of the principle of national self-determination after the Second World War that dramatically increased nationalism's appeal among the minorities, many of them now are determined to rebel against the oppression which they might endure in the past. The crux of national issue is that, if every nation's aim at founding its own state is justified, then this process is not only bound to be full of pain and struggle, but also will never end.

What's worse, in today's world, many people view nationalism and the consequent ethnic problems as constant source of instability of the globe. First of all, many border disputes still remain in many parts of the world after many nations declared its independence, inevitably exacerbating regional tension. Second, some ethnic groups are split by borders drawn arbitrarily by their mother countries, and these divisions have consequences: on the one hand, some ethnic groups are left as minority groups within other nation states, thereby vulnerable to political abuse; on the other hand, the oppression in turn pushed these unfortunate minorities to strive for self-determination, rendering the ethnic problems more complicated. The Kurds can be drawn as an example to illustrate how complex this situation can be. As a minority in several countries including Iraq, Iran and Turkey, the Kurds attract both sympathy for being victims of national oppression and criticism for their acts of violence against the majority of those countries. Last but not least, the wise leaders who drew the borders of nation-states left a good number land-locked naitons that are dependent on their neighbours' infrastructure and goodwill for their trade with the rest of the world, thus undermining their independence.

Moreover, after the establishment of their own nation-state, many nations now seek to cultivate the national consciousness in order to develop the national economy and culture, or safeguard and expand national interests. As a powerful mobilizing tool, nationalism also perfectly cater to these needs. History tells us that compared with other forms of political organization, nation-state is the most appropriate one to strengthen national cohesion, gather social resources and improve social and economic efficiency. But at the same time, today's states also takes on the exclusive characteristics nationalism brings with it which holds that the interests of its nation matters most. Many words stemming from nationalism we see these days, like economic nationalism, TechNationalism and vaccine nationalism during the COVID-19 epidemic, are all linked to negative things like bigotry and xenophobia, something against the trend of globalization.

One may argue that globalization and nationalism are incompatible to such an extent that they are counter destructive. Especially in today's era, where globalization has been espoused by both officials and sholars for many years since it brings tangible benefits to the world and individual, including soaring world GDP and empolymet opportunities, most people are embracing the overall success of the world and condemning the pursue of the interests of any single countries, leaving nationalism less desirable. Countries' cooperative endeavors has

vividly proved this point, with nation-states in Europe taking a backstep with the creation of the European Union for their common good.

But it's too soon to tell that globalization is the demise of nation-state. As a matter of fact, countries that embrace globalization do not necessarily give up on their nationalism as the latter is important in protecting a certain community against the adverse influence of globalization, from loss of sense of identity to international economic crisis and other deterministic forces. The 2008 financial crisis and recent COVID-19 health crisis witnessed a rise of nationalist sentiment, which constituted a strong force against globalization.

Indeed over the past years, the mounting nationalist sentiment could hardly be ignored. For instance, in 2016, the United States elected Donald Trump to the presidency, which demonstrated the growing American support for Donald Trump's nationalist ideas. The sentiments which propelled the presidency of Donald Trump also comparably propelled the Brexit and the revitalization of Russian Orthodoxy. Therefore, although it may be too early to tell whether nationalist forces have prevailed over globalist forces, one thing is clear: nationalism is still an integral part of domestic and international politics, thus affecting our daily life.

5. Conclusion

By exploring the definition and historical evolution of nationalism, people can better understand that nationalism did have varied meanings over the years. At first nationalism had to do with making the territorial state stronger than the webs of the local authorities and creating a new nation state. But as nationalism spread around the world and Europe has become a continent mainly made up of nation states, it had fewer constructive goals and became more occupied with competing with other nations. In general, nationalism in its early stages was highly praised as it played a role in opposing power politics, cultivating democracy and equality, and enhancing social cohesion. But nationalism has been diversified in today's world. People with different backgrounds vary in their understanding of nationalism. An obvious tendency is that they criticize the nationalism belongs to others while thinks highly of their own, which makes national issues almost impossible to tackle. A more rational attitude towards nationalism should be that there is no need to fear nationalism itself -- while it certainly isn't proper everywhere, it isn't everywhere improper.

Today, nationalism is more aimed at resisting the tide of globalization than the colonization or oppression of other countries. And since the primary goal of nationalism which is seeking state power has been basically achieved worldwide, some may argue that nationalism isn't necessary anymore, and "patriotism is enough." But patriotism and nationalism have their overlaps as well as differences. Patriotism may not emphasize exclusion like nationalism does as it is a relatively conservative and ancient feeling, but it cannot become a national belief similar to political religion like nationalism. Patriotism is more an ethical attitude and it lacks political constraints because it exists in the mind of people without a clear political model to constrain. Therefore, relying solely on patriotism is unable to concentrate the spiritual power of the whole people to maximize national interests like nationalism. If it is for the greatest development of national interest, nationalism can be more cohesive than patriotism and is especially important for many developing countries that are bound by powerful ones. Therefore, simply saying that patriotism is enough is a lopsided view.

However, for the lessons that history, especially the rise of fascism during the Second World War, have taught us, some of the characteristics of nationalism, including its exclusionary tendencies towards cultural and political minorities, can be dangerous. Therefore, although nationalism itself should not be overinterpreted or prejudiced due to historical bias, people should always be alert to those who abuse nationalism and the actions that may take it too far.

References

- [1] Berlin, I.(1981) *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [2] Gellner, E.(1983) *Nations and Nationalism*. Cornell University Press, New York.
- [3] Breuilly, J.(1993)*Nationalism and the State*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- [4] Zimmer, O.(2003)*Nationalism in Europe, 1890-1940*. Palgrave, New York.
- [5] Fromm, E.(1994)*Escape from Freedom*. Holt Paperbacks, New York.
- [6] Giddens, A.(1985) *The Nation-State and Violence*. Polity Press, Cambridge.