

The Liberty of Nations

Nationalism is widely denounced today, but its critics overlook its long history as the foundation of limited government and individual liberty and its role in allowing human diversity to flourish.

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Nationalism is on the rise across the globe. It is key to Donald Trump's appeal in the U.S. It is the driving force behind resistance to the European Union and its policies in Britain, Italy, Austria, Poland and Hungary. And it is reflected in the success of Narendra Modi in India, Shinzo Abe in Japan and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. Even before considering more complicated examples such as Russia, Turkey and China—whose politics have arguably taken a nationalist turn as well—this constitutes a broad revival of nationalist ideals and aspirations.

Many critics see this revival as the greatest political danger of our time. But it is a mistake to think of nationalism as an inherently regressive or destructive political force. In fact, nationalism was the engine that established modern political liberty, and it has been a spur to diversity among nations. It has been embraced by both liberals and conservatives, including revered figures such as Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt, David Ben-Gurion and Mahatma Gandhi, Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher.

What did all of these leaders see in nationalism that made it so attractive? And if nationalism is, in many respects, genuinely attractive, what can be said about the powerful considerations that are cited against it?

Let's start with the classic arguments against nationalism. In his essay "Notes on Nationalism" (1945), published weeks after the end of World War II, George Orwell provided a critique of nationalism that is still widely invoked today. Calling nationalism a disordered "habit of mind," he wrote that nationalists identify solely with a "single nation or other unit," treat it as beyond moral reproach and recognize "no other duty than that of advancing its interests."

But Orwell goes well beyond nationalism as the term is usually understood. He takes aim at political extremism on behalf of any collective, including churches, economic classes and "such movements and tendencies as Communism, political Catholicism, Zionism, anti-Semitism, Trotskyism and Pacifism." At the same time, however, Orwell praises patriotism, which he sees as "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."

As it happens, this description of patriotism is exactly how most self-identified nationalists describe their own views. When read in context, Orwell's famous critique of nationalism turns out to be sympathetic to a moderate nationalism.

A more compelling anti-nationalist position was proposed by Elie Kedourie in his 1960 book "Nationalism," which founded an entire academic movement devoted to analyzing the shortcomings of nationalism. Kedourie, an Iraqi-Jewish scholar who admired the Ottoman and British empires, understood that nationalism is not a mental state. It is a political theory that suggests the world is governed best when it is divided into diverse nations, each having independence and self-government.

Kedourie argued that, though this theory had come to seem self-evident, its actual consequences were "disastrous." National populations are too mixed to permit agreed-upon borders, and the resulting disputes between nations invariably lead to tension and mutual hatred. Nationalism is "a chain reaction, a vicious circle," Kedourie wrote, observing that minorities on the wrong side of an international border become "a foreign body in the state" and are persecuted by the majority as it strives either to assimilate or expel them.

Perhaps most important, Kedourie believed that nationalist agitation over borders had precipitated the devastating conflicts of the 20th century. World War I was started by Serbian nationalism, while Hitler's demand to annex the German populations of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland "occasioned the outbreak" of World War II.

But the historical record is far more complex than Kedourie allows. World War I began as an Austrian response to Serbian nationalist violence, but it became a vast conflagration due to the conflicting global aspirations of the British, French and German empires. As for World War II, Hitler did not, after all, attack France, Britain and Russia in order to unite the world's German-speakers. As he wrote in "Mein Kampf," his aim was to make Germany "mistress of the globe" and "lord of the earth." This aspiration was not so different from those of the imperial states that Kedourie applauded.

The difficulties of maintaining an international order of independent nations are quite real, but they don't amount to a case for discarding the national state. In an age of globalized economics, and of international institutions that seem ever more determined to attenuate and replace national independence, it is important to bear in mind the virtues of the national-state framework. In fact, those virtues can help to achieve many political goals shared even by those who favor the disappearance of national distinctions.

Consider the Western tradition of limited government, individual liberty and open elections. Historically, free institutions appeared and persisted in national states such as England, the Netherlands and Scotland—countries built upon a dominant national language and religion, as well as a history of setting aside internal

differences to fight common enemies. In “Considerations on Representative Government” (1861), John Stuart Mill argued that it is no accident that free institutions exist in such countries. As he wrote, “It is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationalities.”

This argument is based on an empirical observation. Limitations on executive authority, achieved by means of competing branches of government and protections for individual rights, have taken root only where a high degree of mutual loyalty and trust exists between rulers and ruled. Similarly, rival tribes will agree to sharing power through democratic institutions only when a powerful “fellow-feeling” or “cohesion” (to use Mill’s terms) has been previously established.

Such political cohesion is rare in arbitrarily assembled human populations. But it can be found in certain human collectives—particularly in families, tribes and nations that share a distinctive cultural inheritance and a history of joint action in the face of adversity. The national state leverages these bonds of mutual loyalty to get individuals to obey the laws, serve in the military and pay taxes, even when their own party or tribe is out of power and the government’s policies are not to their liking.

The United States, with its history of religious and racial diversity, may seem to be an exception, defying the demands of national cohesion. But that isn’t so. The original American states shared the English language, Protestant religion and British legal traditions, and they had fought together in wartime. This shared heritage was strong enough to permit the addition, over time, of other “tribes” to the American nation, including large numbers of Catholic and Jewish immigrants and—in the awful wake of slavery, the Civil War and segregation—African-Americans.

Historically, Americans understood the need to counterbalance this increasing diversity with policies aimed at maintaining a common inheritance rooted in the Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding era. In recent decades, as the country has absorbed ever larger numbers of immigrants from the developing world, the challenge has been to maintain the bonds of mutual loyalty that long held Americans together. It’s not clear that the U.S. is succeeding at this task, which may help to explain the increasing discord in American politics.

National cohesion is the secret ingredient that allows free institutions to exist, the bedrock on which a functioning democracy is built. No wonder, then, that no multinational empire has ever been ruled as a democracy. Lacking mutual loyalty, its respective nationalities see one another only as a threat. That was the case in multinational states such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Syria and Iraq. In the long run, nothing holds such states together but coercion. In such cases, lifting the oppression of the state doesn’t bring freedom, only dissolution and civil war.

Of course, this doesn't mean that every national state will have free institutions and protect individual liberties. But even national states far removed from the West—such as India, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan—have succeeded in imitating the English and American precedents. We are still waiting to see a multinational regime that is able to maintain genuine democracy over time.

Western-style liberties aren't the only advantage of an order of independent national states. We are familiar with the idea that free competition among private business enterprises spurs innovation that no rational planner could have devised in advance. Less frequently discussed is the fact that the political order is, in this respect, much like the economic order. Diversity and originality are a consequence of competition among independent nations, each developing its own unique constitutional and religious traditions.

The periods in history that we regard as the most creative and productive were characterized by such competition among independent national or city-states. Think of ancient Greece and Israel, or of the Italian states of the Renaissance. In the same way, the centuries of competition among national states in Western Europe released dormant energies, fostering an unparalleled degree of experiment and innovation in government, economics, science, religion and art.

Kedourie is right that national independence is often marred by disputes over where to draw the borders between states. But he overlooks what is beneficial in these arguments. Medieval Europe knew nothing of borders in the modern sense of the term; every ruler added to his dominions to the extent that he was able. The ruinous efforts to conquer France by five generations of English kings during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) offer a good example of what a world without strong national borders looks like.

The idea that good borders make good neighbors came to the fore only in the 17th century, thanks to debates between Dutch and English nationalists over the nature of international boundaries and how they are established. At first, these debates were solely concerned with drawing stable national borders in Europe—even as these same nations engaged in the often brutal conquest of foreign peoples in Asia, Africa and the Americas. But by the 20th century, the ideal of the independent nation had become the central factor in dismantling European colonial rule around the world, often with the support of American statesmen.

Finally, in our era of growing intolerance, it is important to notice the relationship between the rise of national states and the spread of political and religious tolerance. The Westphalia treaties of 1648, which brought an end to the Thirty Years' War, marked Europe's turn away from the ideal of a universal monarchy—a Christian aspiration since Roman times—in favor of a diversity of constitutional and religious arrangements in different states. Henry Kissinger calls this “the Great Moderation” in his 2014 book “World Order.” As he writes, the new state system

“took multiplicity as its starting point” and entailed toleration of profoundly divergent views. Catholics had to tolerate Lutheran and Calvinist regimes, monarchists had to tolerate republican regimes, and rulers who tightly regulated their subjects’ affairs had to tolerate regimes affording more extensive liberties.

This formal recognition that diversity among nations is legitimate shattered the old assumption that only one way of life could be correct. Significantly, the Protestant powers negotiating the Westphalia treaties demanded, and in many places secured, freedom of conscience for Protestants in Catholic states. In this way, the toleration adopted by the international system also began to filter into states themselves, eventually attaining the status of a norm in most Western countries.

In certain respects, today’s demands for the imposition of universal standards of speech and belief are a reversion to a pre-Westphalian view of the world. Like universalists of the old school—whether Christian, Muslim or Marxist—the new liberal universalists tend to reject the constitutional, religious and cultural diversity of independent nations. As they see it, the way of life they propose—the downplaying of national distinctions, the unrestricted movement of peoples and goods, the elevation of individual judgment over tradition in all areas of life—will provide what everyone needs. Not surprisingly, the correlate of this rejection of diversity among nations is often a disdain for diversity of viewpoints at home, in one’s own country.

Nationalism has its vices and its extreme expressions. Every nationalist movement contains haters and bigots (though not necessarily more of them than are found in universalist political and religious movements). But nationalism’s vices are outweighed by its considerable virtues. A world in which independent nations are permitted to compete freely with one another is a world in which diverse ways of life can flourish, each an experiment in how human beings should live. We have good reason to believe that such a world holds out the best prospects for freedom, for innovation and advancement, and for tolerance.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Hazony’s new book, “The Virtue of Nationalism,” which will be published by Basic Books on Sept. 4.