

Week 11

Civic and Community Engagement

Origins and Impacts of Nationalism

Introduction

Nationalism is the belief that the interests and values of a particular nation are prior to, and often superior to, those of others. Etymologically, the origins of the term can be traced back to the Latin word *natio*, or “something born,” which was used by Romans to refer to a community of foreigners. It is commonly believed that in its modern sense of “love for a particular nation,” the term was first used in 1798. Nationalism refers to both an ideology and a political movement. In the context of the French Revolution, nationalism has come to be associated with the more inclusive idea of popular sovereignty based on shared and equal citizenship. Later, under the impact of German Romantic thought, it has also been connected to exclusivist notions of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. As a political movement, nationalism has often entailed the fusion of these two ideals, presupposing a world composed of “nation-states” in which, at least in theory, each nation has a right to a state of its own, later called the principle of national self-determination.

What exactly is nationalism?

It feels like we've always had countries, and people who believe their own country is the best. But in fact, nations and nationalism are only around 200 years old. If you think about how long people have been around and all the kinds of governments and kingdoms and empires they've built over thousands of years, nations are actually quite young!

What is a nation? What is nationalism? We often think our nation is an important part of our identity—I am “American,” “Italian,” “Chinese,” and so on. But what does that really mean? How are you part of your country/nation? Well, nationalism begins with the idea that the whole of human society is divided into distinct, autonomous groups called nations. What is nation? A nation is a group of people speaking a common language, sharing a common culture, a sense of a common destiny, and sharing a common history. So, nationalism is also a term to describe the common bonds that hold people together within a nation, creating a new type of community. Tied to this is the idea that individuals' loyalty should be focused on the nation and that each nation should be able to determine its own future—an idea known as self-determination. So, nationalism is also the idea that the nation should have that right to govern itself and the right to self-determination. Finally, sometimes, nationalism is expressed in the belief that one's own nation is better than other nations. In those instances, it can become competitive or

discriminatory.

Nationalism bonds people together in a way that is not genetic, not biological, and not based on even having a personal connection with other members of your nation. In some ways the idea of a nation is actually an imaginary relationship and nations could be considered *imagined communities* because so much of the making of a nation is about creating unity and loyalty in our minds. It is not enough to just have a common government to make a nation—we must have shared cultural symbols like flags, national anthems, a shared idea of the history of our nations to create and build a community of a nation.

Origins

As noted earlier, nationalism is not very old. Before the very end of the eighteenth century (1700s), nationalism didn't even exist as a widespread cultural or political ideology! When people told you where they were from, they said the name of a village or town. How did we go from identifying ourselves by our town to identifying ourselves by our nation? Well, to understand that we need to look at some of the revolutions around the turn of the nineteenth century, especially in Europe, and what people were fighting for, and against.

The French Revolutionary era had great importance in the development and spread of nationalism as an ideology. After French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in 1799, he extended the central government of France into all the countries he conquered across Europe. This was after ten years of war within France, and by now the French people had gained a sense of cohesion against its enemies. Especially Great Britain. They were able to define themselves both as what they were—"We're French, *ça va*?!"—and what they were not—not English, not German, not Italian, nor anything else. The military victories of France helped to create a common sense of history and identity, making nationalism strongest in France. But here's the funny thing about nationalism: As Napoleon expanded and his armies occupied many other European countries, those other countries all agreed national self-determination was the way to go. It was like being bullied by someone who ends up showing you enough wrestling moves that you are able to defeat them. Uniting against the French regime created a sense of common destiny—a sense of nationalism.

Napoleon ended up unintentionally leading Europeans from old regimes of kings, queens, and subjects to new nations of citizens and parliaments, but that's not the only reason nationalism took hold. There were many other trends occurring at the same time including the growth in literacy, urban areas, and print culture (communicating through printed words and images). With the Enlightenment, education and literacy and the many forms of print were crucial to the spread of ideas. Common bonds formed between intellectuals and the reading public within countries. The most devoted nationalists in the early nineteenth century were actually secondary students and university students in urban areas! Peasants who were mostly illiterate and often shared very

little in terms of common culture, were left out of the nationalism conversation. But peasants were still the majority of people in Europe, and their views would change for other reasons.

Other reasons...

Some historians have argued that nationalism became important because older loyalties became less important. For hundreds of years after the split of the Christian church into Catholic and Protestant, wars were fought over religious and dynastic loyalties. The Enlightenment weakened the hold of religion over many parts of the population in West. In addition, European dynasties had relied on absolutism to keep their subjects loyal. But between the Enlightenment ideas and the French Revolution, there were enough critiques against kings and queens to shift the people's loyalties. That made absolutism a lot less absolute.

While nationalism has much to do with unity, its development often comes through the defining of differences. Russia in the nineteenth century is a great example. For Russians, nationalism wasn't just about customs, language, and history, though those mattered. Russian nationalists defined themselves as *not part of the West*—Western Europe. The Western European models of industrialization and constitutional governments had no appeal to Russian nationalists, who wanted to keep their rural and religious traditions, thank you very much.

Across the Atlantic in the Americas, nationalism got going even earlier than in Europe. The national liberation revolutions of the United States and Haiti were tied to similar Enlightenment ideals, though having a national language was less of a factor. As historian Benedict Anderson points out, the creole states in the Americas shared common languages with the colonizing countries of Europe. The connections between the American colonies and the European countries ruling them likely helped the spread of Enlightenment and national ideas.

Even as Napoleon's armies overran most of Continental Europe, Toussaint L'Ouverture helped establish the second independent republic in the Western hemisphere in Haiti in 1804. After several hundred years of European colonization in the Americas—and Asia and Africa as well—things had changed. People had changed, as there was less distinction between European colonizers and the local populations. Now there were Eurasians, Eurafricans, and Euramericans who all had closer ties to the colonized lands than to the European powers who controlled them. Local loyalty to the land where they lived would help propel movements and revolutions for national liberation and decolonial movements both during the nineteenth century and through the mid-twentieth century.

Ethnic Nationalism Vs Civic Nationalism

Nationalism, the sense of identity and loyalty toward one's nation, can manifest in various forms based on what elements or principles define the nation. While the goal of nationalism is often to foster unity, each type has unique foundations and implications. Here's a comparison of the ethnic nationalism with civic nationalism.

Civic Nationalism

Civic nationalism is the concept of a nation based on shared values and beliefs, where national identity is built on adherence to common political principles rather than on ethnicity, race, or religion. This form of nationalism promotes inclusivity, as membership in the nation is open to all who commit to its civic ideals. Here are some key aspects:

Civic Values and Community

Civic nationalism emphasizes a sense of unity through shared values such as liberty, democracy, and tolerance. This helps form a coherent political community where citizens rally around symbols, historical events, and national rituals that affirm their collective identity, such as national holidays and cultural celebrations. This shared history, rather than shared heritage, is what binds the nation together.

Examples of Civic Nationalism

In civic nations, anyone who accepts the nation's values can potentially become a member, often through a citizenship process (naturalization). Many Western countries allow immigrants to integrate and participate as full citizens if they subscribe to the country's values. Tolerance for diversity is a cornerstone of civic nations, encouraging respect and acceptance of different backgrounds and beliefs.

Civic Nationalism and Multiculturalism

Civic nationalism aligns with multiculturalism by valuing the coexistence of diverse cultural identities within a single nation. Civic nations do not require citizens to adopt a single culture but rather to uphold the civic good of the nation. Since the 1970s, multicultural policies have allowed civic nations to embrace religious and cultural differences.

Ethnic Nationalism: A Contrast

In contrast, ethnic nationalism bases national identity on shared ancestry, language, or religion, creating a more exclusive form of nationalism. Ethnic nations are defined by blood ties, where belonging often depends on being born into the ethnic group. This exclusivity can make integration challenging for those outside the ethnic group, and such nationalism has frequently been linked to internal conflicts. Historical ethnic conflicts, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the territorial struggles of the Kurds, illustrate how ethnic nationalism can drive tensions within and between nations.

In summary, civic nationalism fosters an inclusive national identity that accommodates diversity, while ethnic nationalism often promotes a more exclusive, heritage-based identity. Civic nationalism is particularly suitable for modern, multicultural states, as it unites people through shared values rather than exclusive ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

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