

Nationalism

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Nationalism and globalization are often considered processes leading to opposite poles in cultural, economic, and political history, but in fact the relationship between them has been far more complex, and in the past century and a half they may be said to have worked in tandem. Nationalism emerged in a sixteenth-century country in Western Europe – England – its emergence coinciding with the dawning of “the European Age in History”: the rise of Western Europe, in particular, and societies of Western European descent, to the position of economic, political, and to a certain extent cultural leadership of the entire world. It emerged in a region, culturally unified by Western Christianity, which, independently of nationalism, and for the first time on such a broad scale in history, already began to bring other continents under its sway, thereby initiating the process of cultural, economic, and political globalization. At the center of this globalizing world was Spain, which subordinated the European “Holy Roman” Empire and vast areas in South and Central America under the political authority of the Habsburg Crown, united Europe, Africa, and the Americas economically in the “triangular trade,” and dedicated itself to the mission of spreading Roman Catholicism. The world would never again be integrated into one system on so many levels, that is, so meaningfully, but, however profound, the success of this first attempt at globalization was short lived. The emergence of nationalism, reinforced by and reinforcing the disintegration of the Western European Church order which produced the Protestant Reformation, put an end to it: *res publica christiana* split into warring camps, religious differences adding on to and often masking secular political conflicts, and by the eighteenth century the competitive

spirit which pitted nation against nation in every sphere of human endeavor replaced the universalistic, catholic indeed, religious consciousness which for so long united Western Christians.

Globalization is a willed process: it occurs because some individuals are interested in promoting it and have the power to impose it on others. The original attempt at it was to a great extent motivated religiously, by the ardent devotion of “the most Catholic” monarchs of Spain, only recently triumphant in their proper crusade, the reconquest of their long-separate fiefdoms from the Moors. Later, after nationalism put an end to this first globalizing experiment, nationalism would provide the motive behind globalization; globalization for several centuries, until several decades ago, was an expression of particular nationalisms. Like Catholicism which, specifically, it replaced, nationalism is a cultural phenomenon, a form of consciousness, or a way of seeing and therefore constructing reality. Although very much helped by Protestant Reformation in the days of its infancy and often parading in religious garb of various sorts (Christian of every fashion, Muslim, and even, in one instance, Jewish) as it spread and matured, nationalism, unlike Catholicism, is a secular form of consciousness. It is focused on this world of living experience, endowing it with ultimate meaning and viewing it as the source of all law. In the framework of nationalism, religion may be regarded as a national characteristic and cherished and celebrated as such, but whether it is so regarded or not, nationalism, in effect, has no need of God. The central characteristic of nationalism (i.e., the nationalist image of reality), to which the idea of the mundane as inherently meaningful and self-sufficient is closely related, is the idea of the true (natural) society as a sovereign community of fundamentally equal members.

Such society was called by the English creators of original nationalism “nation”; thus the sobriquet of the view of reality centered around it, “nationalism.”

Communities constituted by the nationalism of their members, nations, are inherently competitive. The presumed equality of membership and the definition of the community as sovereign (i.e., as the locus of political and cultural authority, owing obedience to no power outside itself, whether transcendental or earthly) invest individual national identity, derived from the membership in a nation, with dignity. This distinguishes national identity from all other general identities, which, if primarily religious, explicitly discriminate between members of different estates, occupations, sexes, physical characteristics (height, skin color), and so on, and, if primarily political, also discriminate between members of different religions, and reserve dignity to a small fraction of the general membership, and from most particular (estate and occupational) identities, very few of which carry dignity. Dignity, however, is a very precious good; one easily becomes invested in it. Since the dignity of the individual identity is derived from the membership in the nation, one becomes necessarily invested in the collective dignity of the nation, sensitive of the nation’s standing among other nations, and committed to preserving and augmenting its prestige. Thus, national populations, relative to populations of other types of society, are remarkably easy to mobilize for a collective effort. The decision as to which sphere to choose as the arena for international competition depends on the nation’s particular strengths, weaknesses, and values. For example, a nation with a record of producing large numbers of Nobel laureates is likely to decide on science as an area of competition. One considering literature as the supreme expression of genius will invest in superiority in literature. A strong economy (or the conviction that it can be speedily made strong) usually implies opting for the economic sphere as the means to prestige, while resources for a colossal military establishment and/or history of impressive

military achievement similarly favor the military sphere. The nation is then likely to throw its resources accordingly and become competitive in the chosen sphere, whether or not it has competitors. For example, the first nation, England, which originated international economic competition, had no competitors for at least the first two centuries of its ceaseless striving for and unopposed rise to economic supremacy, because there as yet were no other nations. But this, obviously, did not prevent the English from seeing nations and competitors everywhere. Because prestige is always comparative, competition for it is endless. This, in the economic sphere, produces reorientation to endless growth, creating the *modern* economy or *capitalism*. Globalization trends of the two past centuries were, in fact, expressions of nationalism of the two successive economic superpowers: up to World War I Britain, and after World War II the United States, with a period of open competition between the wars.

For the first several centuries of its development (sixteenth through mid nineteenth century), nationalism was entirely confined within the cultural space of one civilization (i.e., of one set of traditions among others, which, while influencing each other in multiple ways, for many hundreds of years developed without any meaningful contact with other such sets) and, until very recently, with the one notable exception of Japan, mostly confined within this civilization. This civilization, in which it was born, is the one we (the editors and the co-authors of this encyclopedia) call ours. Some refer to it as “Western”; some others prefer the moniker “European”; some, finally, opt for the more inclusive appellation of “Judeo-Christian.” It is, in fact, much broader than any of these names suggest. It is the monotheistic civilization and includes all the traditions of Judaism, which is its source, Eastern and Western Christianity, and Islam. This civilization is torn by numerous deeply rooted and deadly conflicts; its member traditions – earlier essentially religious, but in the past half a millennium usually national – tear at it mercilessly, placing it in the constant danger of physical destruction.

And yet, none of these member traditions can be fully understood outside of their civilizational membership; a profound and undeniable kinship unites them despite their mutual jealousies and hatreds. It is quite possible that members of this civilization, which since the beginning of “the European Age in History” has dictated the fate of the world and dominated the political, economic, and cultural relations in it, today occupy the greater part of the planet’s surface. But at least half of humanity belongs to other civilizations, and monotheism sets us apart from them.

Monotheism lies at the root of our way of thinking, determining all the other layers of our consciousness and permeating every aspect of our culture and every sphere of our social life. This is so because it implies the notion, denied by much of the human experience, that the objective reality constitutes an ordered universe – one world, created by One God and forever under His immutable law (obviously impossible within a polytheistic framework, for instance). In its turn, the idea of the ordered universe makes possible the concept of contradiction and gives rise to what we call “Aristotelian” logic. Indeed, the two ideas appear in the same cultural space, the “discovery” of logic in sixth century BCE by the Miletian Thales (the emergence of “theoretical science”) closely following the completion of the first redaction of the Hebrew Bible by the Jews in exile in nearby Babylon. Logic (which could only have emerged on the basis of monotheism) is so central to us that even those of us who are aware of its historical origins tend to see it as an inherent capacity of the human race, a biological capacity rather than a cultural tendency. Its mind-shaping influence might have been confined to the literate (philosophers and Jews who read the Bible) in the first five centuries of its existence, but with Christianity it spread through the illiterate masses as well, was carried further still by the rise of Islam, and has become as natural to people of this civilization as breathing. We cannot imagine reality as anything but an ordered universe – one world under one law, whatever it is.

We cannot think any other way than based on the principle of no contradiction (so much so that we consider deviation from this principle a central characteristic of madness in schizophrenia). Obviously, numerous and profound differences exist among the various traditions (religious, national, political, philosophical, economic, literary, scientific, and so on) within our civilization to which so many traditions belong. And yet, the thought in all of them remains monotheistic (even if the tradition in question is atheistic) and logical; all of them are but variations on a theme.

Because of our internalization of the principle of no contradiction, the adoption of nationalism and the construction/reconstruction of social reality on its basis everywhere within the confines of this civilization led to the institutionalization of the logical implications of the three principles of nationalism: egalitarianism, popular sovereignty, and secularism; however they were interpreted in every particular case. Thus, whether the nationalisms that developed were of the original individualistic and civic type, defining the nation as an association of individuals free to join and leave it, of collectivistic and civic type, with the nation regarded as a collective individual, but individual members still free to leave or join, or of the most common collectivistic and ethnic type, regarding the nation as a collective individual and individual members as cells of this larger organism, connected to it through blood, all of them resulted in the establishment of democracies, “liberal” or “socialist” and, in the latter case, sometimes even “totalitarian.” All of them, logically forced by the principle of fundamental equality of membership, opened the system of stratification and accepted the legitimacy of social mobility, and, forced by the implicit secularism of national consciousness, dramatically increased the value of individual life (of the members of the national community), encouraging personal and social activism and allowing individuals to shape their own lives. All of them also replaced the personal form of government, kingship, with the impersonal state in which, even in cases of dictatorship,

offices represent the will of the people, and completely changed recruitment to political positions. Finally, all of them made the articulation of the principles of nationalism and their logical implications the very backbone of the educational message, thereby making members of nations, since early childhood, aware of the multiplicity of choices theoretically available to them, cognizant that their lives depend on what they choose, and, by so placing them in control of their destinies, responsible for the formation of their personal identities. Thus, all the nationalisms within this monotheistic, and therefore logical, civilization, changed our existential experience: on the one hand, allowing for self-expression unknown to other civilizations and historical periods, and, on the other hand, making us prey to anomie, self-doubt, and, in the worst cases, mental disease on a scale with which, too, no other civilization and historical period has been familiar.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalism was forcibly introduced to Japan. Previously interested, in so far as foreign relations were concerned, only in being left alone, the country, redefined as a nation, became fervently competitive, its members always ready to fight for its dignity (prestige) to the last drop of blood. With record rapidity and no natural resources to speak of, it became a formidable military and economic power, capable, on the force of its nationalist motivation alone, of challenging the most powerful military establishments and economies of what it perceived as the (extended) West. It was the first nation from among the great Asian civilizations. Towards the end of the twentieth century, nationalism spread into China and India, and the two

colossal populations, between them containing almost one-half of humanity, also defined themselves as nations and acquired nationalism's competitive spirit. Unlike Japan, they each have everything it takes to make certain no other power has as much prestige. The "Asian Age in History" is certainly dawning; "the European Age" (of which the dominance of the United States was a part) will soon be over. Within the lifetime of this encyclopedia's authors, the destiny of the world will be dictated by China and India, and we have not the slightest idea what to expect. All one can say is that they do not care for the principle of no contradiction, do not think in binary terms, and are not likely to develop structures realizing logical implications of nationalism, as we all have done.

Thus nationalism, which raised our civilization, and in particular, the West, to world dominance, is also bringing about its decline. We, speaking collectively, have long professed ourselves champions of globalization; with the spread of nationalism into China and India, the ideal of one global system is being achieved. The world, it appears, will, finally join together – in competition. At least the Japanese are clear about what this means: they call it *kyuso* – running and fighting.

SEE ALSO: Capitalism; Citizenship; Civilization.

FURTHER READING

- Greenfeld, L. (1992) *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
 Greenfeld, L. (2001) *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.