

Preface to the Chinese Translation of *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, 2010

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We stand on the verge of a colossal historical change. It can be predicted confidently because all the factors bringing it about are already present and active, we await only that their significance be realized. Nothing but a disaster of unprecedented proportions that would eliminate from the face of the Earth at least a third of human population can prevent it from happening. This change is the rise of the great Asian civilizations, first and foremost China, to world dominance, the end of “the European Age” in history and with it of the economic and political hegemony of the so-called “West.”

This change, which became obvious only in the last few years, after the coming of the new millennium, is the result, ironically, of the spread of the “European,” “Western” influence. The central factor in it is the globalization of nationalism, specifically, the salient fact that nationalism has finally taken root within the general populations of China and India, becoming the decisive collective motivation of these two giant peoples. This has made them economically and politically competitive. The West has never faced anything like this competition. The competition it had known before took place almost entirely within the confines of its own civilization, between economies of roughly comparable size and polities with populations of more or less the same order of magnitude and roughly similar military establishments. Most important, it took place among competitors whose modes of thinking and feeling developed from the same cultural foundations and thus, however different, remained akin. Underneath these rivalries, even when acute, the comforting security of basic cultural familiarity always subsisted, giving every party the sense of understanding and, therefore, control of the situation. The only competitor that challenged Western nations from outside of their own civilization before this new century was Japan. And it is not coincidental that this relatively small Asian island society, a latecomer to the world scene, just emerging from the lethargies and inefficiencies of its feudal past, and poor in natural resources, proved the most formidable rival any Western society has ever encountered, among other things, because none of them understood what moved it.

When, twenty years ago, I was writing this book, “the European Age” in history, so called by an Indian historian, who placed its beginning in the year 1500, was almost half-a-millennium old, but there were no signs of its nearing its end, and, for all we knew, it could last another half-a-millennium. The “European” or “Western” civilization appeared at the height of its powers, in fact, it was about to resolve a major conflict within it, closing the rift which had split it into two warring camps and impeded its ability to dictate the course to the rest of the world, and, reunited, seemed poised to augment its sway. Since this dominance was originally due to nationalism, it stood to reason that, as long as nationalism lasted, it too would last. But a very important element was not factored into this sensible conclusion.

Nationalism which emerged in England in the 16th century was, in the first place, a form of consciousness, an image of reality as fundamentally secular, with most phenomena of significance concentrated in this, terrestrial world, on this one globe, and with phenomena of most significance consisting of living people and their communities, in turn conceived of as sovereign communities of equal members. So envisioned, reality was reconstructed and in fact changed its character. In one European country after another a feudal “society of orders,” reflecting the Christian conception of “the great chain of being,” was replaced by in principle secular, egalitarian societies, professing popular sovereignty. Societies were redefined and reconstructed as nations, in other words. Every institution and every sphere of social life in these nations, which are generally considered “modern,” represent implementations of the three principles of nationalism – its secularism, its egalitarianism, and the principle of popular sovereignty – and could be logically derived from these principles. Thus, the open, or class, system of stratification, in which status or social position, depends on individual merit and achievement, measured in resources, that can be acquired, such as money and education, the modern system of stratification which replaced the rigid, estate, system, in which status was ascribed to families and depended on blood, is the logical implication of the principle of equality of membership. The modern form of government -- the “state,” whose central characteristic is its impersonality, which, by definition, “represents” in its offices the authority of the nation -- reflects the principle of popular sovereignty. Science, the authoritative modern knowledge-producing institution, is directly related to the secularism of nationalism, which privileges empirical reality instead of the transcendental realm, as did Christianity. In this sense, nationalism is the cultural framework of modernity, or, as I wrote, its constitutive element.

As the nation was defined as a sovereign community of equal members, the identity derived from membership in a nation, or nationality, was an inclusive and dignified identity, starkly distinguished in this respect from the religiously justified estate identities which it replaced. National identity thus added a new dimension, the dimension of dignity to common existential experience. It is safe to say that before the advent of nationalism the existential experience of the overwhelming majority of the human beings did not include this dimension. Once experienced, however, dignity proved to be impossible to give up, and because one's individual dignity derived from the membership in a nation, people became deeply invested in the collective dignity of their nation, or in national prestige, the standing of one's nation vis-à-vis other nations. This made nationalism an inherently competitive form of consciousness.

In the book I wrote after *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (but which was translated into Chinese before it), *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth*, I showed how this competitive mentality produced modern economy, i.e. the economy oriented to sustained growth, the unending international competition for wealth. Obviously, however, this competitiveness affected at least to the same extent other spheres of international coexistence – in the first place, politics with its connection to military aggrandizement, but also different areas of cultural creativity, including, significantly, science, and morality. Competition for the right of a nation to morally arbitrate international affairs and even to pass judgment on the internal conduct of other nations is, perhaps, the one in which the emotional investment of all parties is the greatest, and the political, the military, and the economic powers of a nation, which are believed to reflect its moral stature, are constantly adduced to prove this right.

Despite the essential secularism of nationalism, it is important to realize that it could only emerge in a religious environment of a certain kind. It was a product of a particular **civilization**, i.e., of a distinct, self-enclosed, self-sufficient, and self-generating variant of cultural reality, that -- for all intents and purposes independently of other such variants with which it may coexist -- has developed over multiple generations, multiplying in the process its interlacing traditions. The foundation of the civilization which had produced nationalism was laid by the religious tradition of Jewish monotheism. Posing ONE GOD ruling over everything, Jewish monotheism posed that objective reality represented a **universe**, i.e. one, consistently ordered, entity. (It is clear, for instance, that a polytheistic culture allowed for no such conception and, therefore,

channeled thought and feeling in very different directions, as would any non-monotheistic symbolic system.) The conception of objective reality as an ordered universe, in turn, dramatically increased the mind's sensitivity to disorder and so made possible the ascendancy of logic based on the principle of no contradiction – the Aristotelian logic, so called after the one who later formalized it. For people who expect consistent order from reality, contradictions represent a major irritant, and indeed logic has been one of the determinants of the existential experience – i.e., of life as lived – for the many hundreds of generations in this **monotheistic civilization**. Because of the foundational importance of monotheism in it, “monotheistic civilization” is the proper name for what has been referred to, always too narrowly, as “European,” “Western,” and “Judeo-Christian” civilization. This means, among other things, that in the last 1500 years this civilization, in addition to Judaism and Christianity, has included the third monotheistic tradition, Islam.

Nationalism, as I explained in this book, emerged out of the **anomic** situation – i.e., the contradiction between the established view of reality and the experience -- of the new, Henrician, aristocracy in the 16th century England. It could only emerge in a setting in which reality is expected to be logically consistent, in which logic, in other words, has all-pervading psychological significance, being involved, in fact, in the normal mental functioning itself. Nationalism being inherently competitive, a new powerful spirit and desire for dominance came to animate first England and then other European and European-derived societies, which soon enabled them to dictate the collective will of their civilization to the entire world. The politics, the conflicts, the problems of these nations affected the rest of the planet. A new economy oriented to consistent growth, capitalism, came into being. A new form of knowledge, focused on this, empirical, world and based entirely on logic, science, became the ultimate arbiter of judgment and brought about an unprecedented degree of control over physical reality.

All these elements of modernity could only emerge in the “Western” or monotheistic civilization because of the great psychological significance in it of logic and logical contradictions. But they could be imported into other civilizations without this psychological baggage. And because of that they could make these other civilizations far stronger than they ever made the civilization in which they originated. This was already evident in the spectacular rise of Japan. Forced out of its peaceful isolation to serve the ends of Western powers, it acquired Western science with an astounding rapidity (always keeping it separate from other spheres of the life of its people, in

accordance with the motto “Western knowledge/Eastern values”) and within a generation rose to become the most redoubtable military and economic competitor the leading Western nations ever encountered. And Japan was small and poor in resources. All it had was its nationalist motivation. Now nationalism has finally spread in China and India, the two colossal powers that never lacked anything but motivation to rule the world between them.

You arrive at the world scene at the moment when our civilization is exhausting its creative potential, having expended itself in contradictions it could not resolve or could not resolve but at a very great cost. You are in possession of the ways of thought that made us creative and the competitive spirit of nationalism which made us strong, but you have them without allowing them to take possession of your entire lives. You might be spared the tremendous burden of **anomie** – the torture by contradiction – which has been for centuries the bane of existence among the best of us. Moreover, you know us: you had to watch us, perforce, and learned to understand what moves us, while we in our arrogance believing that all men are created in our image have never paid sufficient attention to your otherness.

The future belongs to you. I hope you will be kind to us and take a better care of the world, than we did.