

PATRIOTISM AND NATIONALISM – THE PROS AND CONS

Paper for Kingston Philosophy Café discussion on 8 September 2020

1. What do we mean by patriotism and nationalism?

A problem with discussing what's good or bad about patriotism and nationalism is that the words can mean different things to different people and arouse very different emotions within them. As philosopher C. E. M. Joad (1891-1953)¹ was fond of saying: "It all depends on what you mean by..."

- *Patriotism* is generally taken to mean loyalty to one's country and a willingness to defend it against verbal/physical attack. This assumes, of course, the division of people into the territorial groupings we call countries, each with a sovereign government, the decisions of which are binding upon their citizens. People, however, may be loyal to their *country* without necessarily being loyal to the *political regime* which happens to control it – e.g. many Germans fought loyally for Germany during the Second World War whilst detesting Hitler's Nazi regime.
- *Nationalism* involves a *sense of belonging* to a particular group of people (whether or not they currently have their own nation state) on the basis of their shared (real or imagined) characteristics – e.g. common descent, culture and language. Such people generally occupy an identifiable geographical area² but a substantial number may have become dispersed through enforced, semi-voluntary or voluntary re-location (think of the impact of the Jewish Diaspora, slave-trading, asylum-seeking and economic migration). A growing sense of national identity (perhaps deliberately promoted) may be fulfilled by the merging of existing states (e.g. the formation of the German Empire in 1871 by the amalgamation of German principalities under the leadership of Prussia). Where the lands occupied by people seeking nationhood are under the control of an imperial/colonial power, such fulfilment may require armed struggle (e.g. the American War of Independence 1775-83) but, depending upon that power's attitudes/interests, might be achieved relatively peacefully through negotiation and agreement – as happened to a large extent when the UK recognised after the Second World War that the maintenance of the British Empire was both morally and practically unsustainable.

2. In an extreme form, nationalism can be xenophobic and racist.

Nationalism, when evidenced as a desire for self-determination and political independence, might seem well-intentioned and morally justifiable.³ It can also find expression, however, in feelings of superiority over, and even hatred for, the members of other national groups. In its worst manifestations it is racist and often coupled with a desire to dominate/subjugate other peoples. George Orwell, in comparing patriotism with nationalism, defines them as follows. "By 'patriotism' I mean 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 upon other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality."⁴ We can, of course, take issue with Orwell's definitions. Patriotism, for example, may be associated not only with pride in one's own country but also with hostility towards others. As Voltaire (1694-1778) comments: "It is lamentable, that to be a good patriot one must become the enemy of the rest of mankind."⁵ Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is particularly condemnatory of patriotism stating: "Patriotism in its simplest, clearest, and most indubitable signification is nothing else but a means of obtaining for the

¹ In a debate at the Oxford Union Society in 1933, Joad proposed the motion: "This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country." It was passed (275 for, 153 against), becoming known as the Oxford Oath. Winston Churchill later claimed, without evidence, that it led Hitler to believe the British people would adopt a pacifist stance in the event of war.

² For a fascinating examination of the impact of geography upon nation-building and national politics see:

Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, 2015, Elliott and Thomson Limited.

³ Big problems arise, however, where a movement for political independence is opposed by a significant minority of the population concerned, perhaps fearing that the majority in favour will dominate over and discriminate against them.

⁴ Essay: *Notes on Nationalism* (1945)

⁵ *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764)

rulers their ambitions and covetous desires, and for the ruled the abdication of human dignity, reason, and conscience, and a slavish enthrallment to those in power."⁶

3. Nationalism can be used as a means to divert attention away from social/economic inequality.

We do not, for the most part, live as isolated individuals but as members of a variety of human groups based upon factors such as family/kinship, locality, friendship, occupation and mutual interest (including an interest in philosophy!). Such membership is generally voluntary, the main constraint upon our freedom of choice over where/how we live, being our economic/social position. The more unequal the distribution of ownership and power in society the less freedom of choice for all but a privileged minority. Some economic/social systems (most notably feudalism and slavery) enshrine human inequality in the ownership not just of physical assets but of *people*. In any case, those who own/control the assets needed to produce goods and services have the power to steer the economy in a direction which serves their own interests. A permanent threat to them is that the exploited under-classes (be they slaves, serfs, wage-slaves or whoever) may become disaffected and rebel against the system – an early example being the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381.⁷ The promotion of *nationalism* by the ruling classes helps to counter disaffection by diverting people's attention away from the reality of economic inequality and towards a concocted vision of a socially united country under threat from foreign enemies and their 'knavish tricks'.⁸

4. Reforming societies along socialist lines, some claim, will moderate/eliminate national divides.

Socialism provides a competing perspective to that of nationalism, maintaining as it does that:

1. societies are divided traditionally on class lines (related to the ownership of the means of production);
2. the members of each class have more interests in common with their counterparts in other countries than with the members of other classes in their own;
3. worker control over the means of production will moderate, if not eliminate, national divisions.

Karl Marx (1818-83) states that "the working man has no country" and that "the supremacy of the proletariat will cause [national divisions] to vanish still faster." Historically, there have been differences of approach within the socialist movement represented by *communism* – Trotskyites pursuing the creation of a socialist world commonwealth, Stalinists and Maoists accepting the doctrine of 'socialism in one country'. A political movement which presented itself as socialist whilst being at the same time intensely nationalistic and overtly racist was, of course, German National Socialism under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Italian Fascism under the leadership of Benito Mussolini displayed similar traits.

5. Nationalism diverts attention away from individual responsibility and accountability.

Nationalism may be challenged simply by *reasoning*, upon the basis of observation and evidence, that:

1. no group of people, however defined, has a monopoly on vice or virtue;
2. if people are to be judged at all, it is as *individuals* not aggregates;
3. when judging individuals, what matters is their *behaviour* and *moral character*, not their physical characteristics or where they happen to have been born and/or now live.

For some individuals, patriotism and nationalism may provide a cloak for personal inadequacy. According to Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860): "The cheapest sort of pride is national pride; for if a man is proud of

⁶ *On Patriotism* (1894)

⁷ The causes of the Revolt were complex but certainly included resentment at growing social/economic inequality. The radical cleric John Ball addressed the rebels outside London with the following words (for which he was later hung, drawn and quartered). "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty."

⁸ The reference is to the UK national anthem's second verse which is now rarely sung and of which most people are ignorant: "O Lord our God arise, / Scatter her enemies, / And make them fall: / Confound their politics, / Frustrate their knavish tricks, / On Thee our hopes we fix: / God save us all."

his own nation, it argues that he has no qualities of his own of which a person can be proud".⁹ It is certainly the case that, by feeling part of an idealised 'nation' and associating themselves with its (often mythical) achievements, even though these date back centuries before they were born, some people may bolster their own egos – perhaps imagining and taking vicarious credit for helping to defeat the Spanish Armada or the French at Agincourt, Blenheim and Waterloo!

6. Preachers of patriotism often have no loyalty other than to their own personal interests.

As already suggested, whipping up nationalist fervour and raising the spectre of scheming foreigners with their 'knaveish tricks' is a standard tactic of individuals in positions of power when they need to divert attention away from their own failings, not to say downright corruption and criminality – viz. Alexander Lukashenka in Belarus (although if he is worried about a *genuine* threat to the independence of his country he would do better to look towards the east rather than the west)! Another tactic is to align oneself with 'traditional national values' (which in Russia, apparently, approve wife-beating) and the authoritarian established religions which espouse them – hence the (unholy?) alliance of Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church. An irony is that many of those in positions of political/economic power who assiduously present themselves as loyal patriots are in practice loyal primarily, if not exclusively, to themselves and equally assiduous in stashing away the ill-gotten gains of kleptocracy through the acquisition of foreign assets (including property in London and elsewhere in the UK). There appears to be a large measure of truth in the assertion of Samuel Johnson (1709-84) that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".

7. Democracies can be as nationalistic as autocracies. Nationalism might have democratic benefits.

Authoritarian regimes are not alone in exalting 'the nation' and claiming it enjoys divine blessing. Democratic countries are as likely as any others to insist that 'God is on their side' (see Annexe 1 for Bob Dylan's take on the subject). This was certainly true of the warring nations in the First World War (see Annexe 2 for a sceptical view of the 'honour' of dying for one's country). But is there *nothing* good about nationalism? David Miller, Professor of Political Theory at Oxford University, argues that, in moderate form at least, nationalism alleviates some problems to which democracies are susceptible. He makes two claims:

1. Democracy depends upon the willingness of minorities to accept majority decisions. They are more likely to do this if they feel a sense of national affinity with their fellow citizens and therefore more trusting that the majority who are in a position of power at any time will not discriminate against them.
2. The support of citizens for measures to promote social justice which may be of no direct benefit to themselves (e.g. the support of rich people for more spending on social security) depends upon their having a sense of national/collective identity and thus of obligation to others.

Annexe 3 includes some relevant extracts from Miller(2003) *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*.

8. Will nations, and thus nationalism, become things of the past?

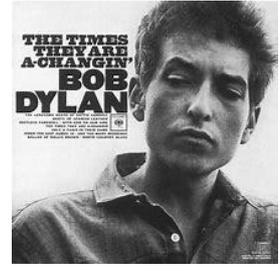
Most of the world's countries are products of the 20th century and of decolonisation. Globalisation and the massive power of multi-national corporations with turnovers which exceed the GDP of many countries, call into question the extent to which nation states, whether autocratic or democratic, can exercise any real degree of autonomy. Even larger nations have found it necessary to co-operate with others as part of supra-national organisations – the European Union is an obvious example. How far will this process go? The 'cosmopolitan' dream of a single world government appears unachievable and anyway undesirable. The challenge is to achieve a workable compromise where nation states continue to exist as convenient units for the purposes of governance and the expression of localised beliefs, practices and feelings of common identity – their less harmful manifestations at least – but which observe internationally agreed standards of behaviour, particularly with respect to the observance of basic human rights and freedoms.

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⁹ *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).

Annexe 1 – Is God on our side?

Bob Dylan's song *With God on Our Side* was first performed in 1963 and appears on his 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. It uses the tune of a traditional Irish folk song – also used by singer/songwriter Dominic Behan (a passionate Irish nationalist/republican like his brother, writer Brendan Behan) for his song *The Patriot Game*. Dylan questions the belief, widely held by patriots/nationalists, that their own country possesses not only a monopoly on virtue but also the exclusive blessing/protection of a divine being (assuming they believe that one exists).



1. Oh my name it is nothin'
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I's taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And that the land that I live in
Has God on its side

2. Oh the history books tell it
They tell it so well
The cavalries charged
The Indians fell
The cavalries charged
The Indians died
Oh the country was young
With God on its side

3. Oh the Spanish-American
War had its day
And the Civil War too
Was soon laid away
And the names of the heroes
I's made to memorize
With guns in their hands
And God on their side

4. Oh the First World War, boys
It closed out its fate
The reason for fighting
I never got straight
But I learned to accept it
Accept it with pride
For you don't count the dead
When God's on your side

5. When the Second World War
Came to an end
We forgave the Germans
And we were friends
Though they murdered six million
In the ovens they fried
The Germans now too
Have God on their side

6. I've learned to hate Russians
All through my whole life
If another war starts
It's them we must fight
To hate them and fear them
To run and to hide
And accept it all bravely
With God on my side

7. But now we got weapons
Of chemical dust
If fire them we're forced to
Then fire them we must
One push of the button
And a shot the world wide
And you never ask questions
When God's on your side

8. Through many dark hour
I've been thinkin' about this
That Jesus Christ
Was betrayed by a kiss
But I can't think for you
You'll have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot
Had God on his side

9. So now as I'm leavin'
I'm weary as Hell
The confusion I'm feelin'
Ain't no tongue can tell
The words fill my head
And fall to the floor
If God's on our side
He'll stop the next war.

Annexe 2 – The Reality of war. Just how sweet is it to die for one's country?

In his poem *Dulce et Decorum est*, First World War poet Wilfred Owen (killed in action a week before Armistice Day) describes the effect of poison gas on a British soldier. The last lines of the poem (published posthumously in 1920) quote Roman poet Horace and translate as "How sweet and honourable it is to die for one's country".

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.



Annexe 3 – Extracts from David Miller (2003) *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, (Chapter 7: Nations, States and Global Justice)

"[Do] nations really exist? Or are they not just imagined but imaginary? Is there anything that genuinely differentiates the people who live on one side of a national boundary from their counterparts on the other side? Dean Inge once said that 'a nation is a society united by a delusion about its ancestry and by a common hatred of its neighbours'. Like most good quotations, this one contains more than a grain of truth. National identities very often do emerge out of antagonism towards some neighbouring people: being British was once very much a matter of not being French, as being Scottish is a matter of not being English, and being Canadian a matter of not being American. Nations also typically develop myths about themselves – about their unique moral or cultural qualities, about their past military or political (or sporting) achievements, and so forth. None the less, national identity is not simply illusory and it serves good purposes as well as bad. The groups we call nations share, in nearly all cases, a common language, a history of living together over time, and cultural traits that are expressed not only in literary form but also in the physical environment – in the way towns and cities are built, in the pattern of the landscape, in monuments, religious buildings, and the like. When new generations are brought up in those cultural and physical surroundings, they cannot help being shaped by this common heritage – even if they rebel against many aspects of it.

"The influence of national culture is particularly strong in the case of nations that have states of their own, because here cultural transmission takes place through the laws, the institutions of government, the education system, and the national media, as well as through the informal channels just mentioned. Nation and state reinforce one another – the power of the state is used to strengthen national identity, while people who are tied together in this way are more willing to accept a common political authority and rally to its defence when it is attacked. This explains why nation states have proved to be relatively successful as political units: they are large enough not to be engulfed by imperial armies, yet at the same time they can call upon the loyalty of their members when resistance is necessary.

"One of the great difficulties in democratic politics is to reconcile majorities and minorities – to persuade the minority group to accept the decisions of the majority, while at the same time persuading the majority not to trample on the wishes or interests of the minority but to try to accommodate them when reaching decisions... One of the factors likely to encourage what we might call 'democratic self-restraint' [is] trust between the parties. In a society where people are generally trusting of others, they are less anxious about finding themselves in a minority on some issue, more willing to allow the majority to implement its decision, on the basis that no very great harm will come to them. Where trust is absent, or evaporates, by contrast, every decision becomes potentially a life-and-death issue.

"We need to ask what makes people more likely to trust others, particularly others who are not known to them personally. Social psychologists who have investigated this question have found that one important factor is perceived similarity: we are inclined to trust those who we believe resemble us in one way or another. It is not difficult to think of explanations for this: it may be a trait that we have inherited from the early stages of human evolution, when people cooperated with one another in extended kin groups, and had to learn how to discriminate between insiders and outsiders. In large scale societies, where people may look and sound very different from one another, trust is a problem. But national identity can help to solve it: we may disagree politically with the other side, we may even despise much of what they stand for, but we know that they still have a good deal in common with us – a language, a history, a cultural background. So we can trust them at least to respect the rules and the spirit of democratic government.

"What makes people willing to support policies that will promote social justice, particularly when they can see that they will stand to lose when the policies are implemented? For instance they may have to pay

higher taxes to create the resources that are needed to provide adequate welfare services for all citizens, whereas it would be cheaper for them to purchase health care, education, and so forth privately. Or in order to create equal opportunities for groups that have hitherto lagged behind, they may have to relinquish some of their existing privileges, like giving their offspring fast-track access to jobs and college places. Why might they do this? From a sense of justice and fairness, we might answer. But again we need to ask: what makes people willing to deal with others on terms of justice, and to answer *this* question we need once again to consider the issue of shared identity.

"It is true of course that we recognise some obligations of justice to people everywhere, regardless of whether we share anything with them beyond our common humanity. We know that it is wrong to kill, injure, or imprison them without good cause, and that if they are in danger or distress we should come to their aid. This common knowledge can help us make sense of the idea of global justice. But social justice imposes much greater demands on us – in particular it often requires that we accept restrictions placed on us by principles of equality when we could do better for ourselves, or our friends and relations, by casting those restrictions off. No one is killed or injured if we cheat on our taxes or bend the rules to give a nephew a nice job he doesn't deserve. So what might motivate us to accept those demands? As political philosophers like John Rawls have emphasised, one very important motive is the wish to live together with people on terms that we can all justify to one another. In other words, if somebody asks me to explain my behaviour – explain why what I am doing is acceptable – I can do so by appealing to principles that she and I can both accept.

"The strength of this motive will depend on how closely tied we are to the other people involved – it is most powerful in small face-to-face groups – but national communities provide at least some of the cement that makes people concerned to live with others on terms of justice. I am not claiming that within existing nations people always conduct themselves justly –that is far from being the case – but only that this makes them more willing to support policies involving progressive taxation or equal opportunity legislation."
