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Nationalism

The term "nationalism" refers to support for a nation. In common parlance, a nation is a country like Albania or Zambia. However, it is useful to distinguish several things: countries, nations, states and governments.

Let's start with "country." It is easiest to think of a country as a geographical area plus everything in it, including mountains, plants and people. Argentina as a country has plains and rivers, sheep, buildings and a population of 43 million.

Next consider "government." This can refer to the political rulers within a country. Governments may include both an executive, with a president and cabinet, and a legislature. In dictatorships, there may be no legislature, or only a powerless one. In parliamentary systems, the executive—including the prime minister and cabinet—is drawn from the legislature. "Government" may also include various administrative supporters for the executive and legislature, for example heads of treasury, defence and environment departments.

Closely related to government is the state. The state includes everything officially run by or owned by the government. It includes the various departments or ministries that are headed by government figures. It includes government-run institutions such as schools, police, military, railways and so forth. People's private lives are

not part of the state; only when they are at work are government employees part of the state. Private corporations are not part of the state. Independent religious bodies are not part of the state. (In a few countries, like Iran and Israel, there is a state religion.)

In simple terms, the government runs the show and the state is the government plus everything it runs.

Then there is "nation," a more challenging notion. A nation can be said to be a group of people who share a common identity. This may involve shared experience, blood ties, the same language, a religion, eating habits and various traditions. Among Native Americans, tribes like the Apache, Sioux and Cherokee are called nations: they had (and to some extent still have) shared language and culture, distinct from other tribes. In Europe, nations include the Armenians, Finns, French, Hungarians and Kurds.

The complication is that nations do not necessarily correspond to countries. Most people living in Japan today might be considered members of the Japanese nation, but there are some indigenous people, for example the Ainu from northern Japan (and eastern Russia), who are a distinct cultural group, and there are some immigrants, for example from Korea, who would be part of a different nation: the Korean nation.

Then there are nations that are spread across lots of countries. The Jewish people could be considered to be a nation; they are concentrated in Israel but millions live in other countries. People of Chinese ancestry don't all live in China: many live in Malaysia, Vietnam and other

countries. (And within the country of China there are numerous other national groups).

Immigration is a complication for understanding nations. Consider an Egyptian family that immigrates to New Zealand. Are they Egyptian or Kiwis? If they remain in an Egyptian enclave and maintain Egyptian culture (religion, food, language), then they might be considered part of the Egyptian nation. But if the children grow up speaking English with a New Zealand accent, play or follow Kiwi sports, join the Anglican Church (or none at all), have they become part of the New Zealand nation? Or is New Zealand a nation at all, given its mixture of Maoris, descendants of British and other European immigrants, and new arrivals from various countries?

Reference is often made to a "nation-state." This concept assumes that a nation and a state coincide. In some cases it is nearly true, but nearly always there are some indigenous people, some immigrants and some locals who have emigrated (called expatriates).

Benedict Anderson calls nations "imagined communities," and this idea has been widely taken up.[1] A community is a group of people having something in common: they live in the same neighbourhood, eat lunch together, collect stamps or whatever. An imagined community is one in which what people have in common is not something they do, but only something in their imagination, in their minds. If you live in Brazil, you

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1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991, revised edition).

cannot possible interact with 200 million other people, including ones with different religions, ethnicities and ways of life. "Brazil," as a community, as a group of people, exists primarily in the minds of the people living in Brazil, as well as in the minds of people from other parts of the world.

Isms

Let's go from the nation to nationalism. "Nationalism" usually refers to a commitment to or identification with a nation. It can involve pride. Many people are excited when "their" national team does well in the World Cup, despite having no personal connection with any members of the team. Nationalism, at the psychological level, might involve support for or identification with political leaders, policies, climate, habits or any number of other attributes. One's own country usually is contrasted with others. Nationalism involves identification with and support for *my* country, not others. For most people, nationalism is on behalf of a single country, though it's possible to identify with Africa, the European Union or the world.

Nationalism, strangely enough, is only sometimes on behalf of a nation, at least in the sense that many scholars think of nations. If we think of Canadian nationalism, it is usually connected to the whole population, including separatists in Quebec and members of First Nations. So what should this commitment to a country be called? There's no such word as countryism. So perhaps this is where the word patriotism is useful. A patriot is a person who supports their own country, and patriotism is the commitment itself.

In many cases, patriotism is harnessed to the goals of the state or government. A patriot is prone to support policies adopted by the government in relation to other governments. This is pronounced in the case of war: patriots typically support their compatriots—citizens of their own country—against enemies. The opposite of a patriot is a traitor, someone who supports the enemy.

Patriotism has its positive side, including pride in group accomplishments and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of the whole. When people in a country are doing worthwhile things, it makes sense to support them and take pride in their achievements. But there is a darker side to patriotism: it can involve supporting crimes and abuses, including military aggression, torture and genocide. In the US, there is a saying, "My country, right or wrong." Supporting "the US"—usually meaning the government's policy in international relations, when it seems in the interests of the US people—for good causes is reasonable, but why support policies and actions that are wrong?

Patriotism becomes "blind patriotism" when people take a position simply because it is identified with their country or state, even if it involves lying, unfair dealings, theft and other crimes. This sort of patriotism is common when agents of the state are involved, including political leaders and soldiers. In the US, supporting US troops in foreign wars has become unquestionable; it is a touchstone of being patriotic. Even US opponents of the government's wars are careful not to criticise the troops, restricting themselves to criticising politicians and policies. This remains true even when the troops are involved in crimes.

In 1968, during the Vietnam war—in Vietnam called the American war—US soldiers in Charlie Company went on a rampage of killing in a village named My Lai, leaving hundreds of civilians dead, including women and children. Commanders informed about the massacre did nothing. Ron Ridenhour, hearing about what had happened, collected information and sent a powerful letter to various media and politicians, but none of them would act on it. Eventually, through the efforts of investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the story broke, a year after the massacre. However, only one soldier, Lieutenant William Calley, was convicted of any crime, and he served minimal time in prison. Many US citizens sided with Calley. On the other hand, Hugh Thompson, who had tried to stop some of the killing and who testified about what had happened, was ostracised by other troops. In the midst of the war, many people in the US did not want to know about crimes by "their" troops. It was a classic case of "my country, right or wrong"—in this case, wrong.

Related to the concept of nationalism is what can be called statism: support for the state, sometimes glorification of the state. It is often associated with dictatorships, in which the ruler is attributed superhuman capacities. One example of statism is Nazi Germany, with Hitler the father figure who could do no wrong. The massive rallies at which Hitler spoke were rituals of worshipping the state.

Nazi Germany shows a toxic mixture of nationalism and statism. The nation in this case was associated with Aryan ethnicity and culture, as distinguished from others such as Slavs, Gypsies and Jews. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler initiated the "final solution," the

extermination of Jews and other non-Aryans. This could be considered the operation of the state to enforce a particular conception of the nation, using the most drastic methods.

Historically, state elites try to harness nationalism for their own purposes. But this is complicated because nations don't map onto states in a one-on-one fashion. So what state elites usually try to do might better be said to be promoting statism and countryism.

Benedict Anderson and imagined communities

As mentioned earlier, Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" is widely cited as a way of understanding how nationalism operates. In a population of one million, it is impossible to know more than a tiny fraction of the people in a country, so the "community" exists only in the minds of the people, not in direct interactions.

Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* is a highly sophisticated treatment of the origins and spread of nationalism. He uses a highbrow writing style and assumes the reader can understand short passages in French and German. This is not bedtime reading, but it does contain many insights relevant to patriotism tactics.

Many of today's patriots refer to long traditions, often talking about a homeland that has been defended or sought for centuries. Serbians talk about the battle of Kosovo in the year 1389. However, Anderson says that any such long traditions exist only in the imagination. National identity is fairly new, something that developed beginning in the late 1700s in the Americas, adopted in

Europe in the early 1800s, and then exported to Africa and Asia through imperial conquests and by providing a model for others to follow.

Anderson notes that Europeans in the year 1500 or 1700 did not think of themselves as part of a nation. Upper class Europeans were part of a house of nobility that could stretch across several of today's countries. Peasants thought in terms of the area where they lived and worked.

Anderson, drawing on the work of other scholars as well as his own studies, attributes the origin of nationalism to developments in the Americas from roughly 1760 to 1830 involving a complex interplay of administration, printing and capitalism. Spain's colonies in the Americas were divided into administrative units. Spanish-born administrators in the Americas could move from unit to unit—for example from Chile to Mexico—and climb a career ladder with the highest rungs being in Spain, the centre of empire. But American-born administrators, called creoles, were restricted to a single unit. Nationalism provided a means of mobilising the population to throw off the restrictions imposed by Spanish rulers. The newly independent states were divided along the same boundaries as the divisions in the Spanish colonial bureaucracy.

Back in Europe, in contrast, languages and printing in the vernacular (rather than Latin, previously used for official purposes) enabled the mobilising of support for control over populations by emerging states. In Japan, the threat of conquest after 1868 triggered a process of administrative centralisation, with conscription, promotion of universal male literacy, elimination of the privileged position of the samurai, the removal of feudal controls

over peasants, and subordination of local military units to a central command. Nationalism was a tool for modernisation.

Anderson identifies another type of nationalism, sponsored by governments that wanted to prevent challenges from below. This sort of "official nationalism" was important in Europe in the mid 1800s. The Austro-Hungarian empire, for example, was threatened by popular nationalism, so it sponsored its own fake nationalism. This involved rewriting of history, official propaganda and compulsory state-run education (presenting a mythical national past). Nevertheless, there was a tension in official nationalism between the myth of a single ancestor nation and the reality of an empire containing several possible nations.

The paradoxes of official nationalism were accentuated in England, where a mythical history of England was developed. It was mythical in that there was no historical English nation. For example, some of the supposedly "English" kings were from continental European dynastic houses and could not even speak English, and centuries ago residents of what is today called England had no sense of being part of a nation. Anderson notes, parenthetically:

> The barons who imposed Magna Carta on John Plantegenet did not speak "English," and had no conception of themselves as "Englishmen," but they were firmly defined as early patriots in the classrooms of the United Kingdom 700 years later.[2]

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2 Ibid., p. 118.

There was also a tension between England as a nation and the reality of an empire. In the 1800s within the empire, aspiring colonials seeking a career in government service were blocked in their advancement. A talented, educated bureaucrat from India could never attain a position in London, nor even in the capitals of colonies in Africa such as Kenya. Anderson notes that there was a strong dose of racism in British colonial policies, but that white colonials, for example from Australia and New Zealand, faced the same blockages. The reality was an empire ruled by upper class figures at the centre, so the idea of a nation, in which all members have some sort of common membership and some level of equality, was patched on top and never fully convincing, hence the need for government sponsored efforts to foster a manufactured national myth.

After the initial development of nationalism in some parts of the world, it became a model for use elsewhere, by both insurgent movements against colonial powers in Africa and Asia and by governments to forestall challenges. As a model, nationalism has been extraordinarily powerful. Anderson notes the significance of the wars between China, Vietnam and Cambodia in the late 1970s. These wars were the first between socialist states, states that were premised on international solidarity of the working classes. In practice, though, rulers found it expedient to encourage citizens to identify with the state rather than the working class. Anderson notes that the average Chinese peasant had no particular interest in a dispute with peoples to the south.

Anderson addresses the connection between nationalism and racism. It is commonly thought that these are related, but Anderson notes a positive side to the emotional dimension of nationalism, namely that it is about love for a country, not contempt for supposedly lesser ethnicities. He points to a remarkable absence, among writers from subjugated populations, of antagonism towards their oppressors: they are far more likely to laud their own culture than to denigrate others. Though there is more to say about the connection between nationalism and racism, it is wise not to assume they are automatically related.

John Breuilly and nationalism as politics
John Breuilly presents a useful perspective in his book *Nationalism and the State*.[3] Basically, he sees nationalism as a form of politics, in other words as a way of exercising power, most commonly to take control of the state. To appreciate Breuilly's perspective, it's helpful to look first at conventional views of nationalism that see it as associated with support for a nation, based on cultural characteristics such as language, ethnicity and customs. The usual idea is that members of a nation may feel oppressed by a state and seek to create a state of their own.

Breuilly says it is more the other way around. Certain groups want to increase their power, and can do this by challenging the state, seeking the power of a state for themselves. They could justify their challenge by claiming

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3 John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, 2nd edition).

to be superior administrators or having a better set of beliefs, for example defending freedom from tyranny as in the American Revolution. However, in many circumstances it is more effective for challengers to claim to represent the aspirations of a nation. For this purpose, they then refer to an illustrious history of the nation and emphasise cultural characteristics that distinguish their group from others.

Consider Yugoslavia, a country prior to 1990 containing many different ethnic groups: Serbians, Croatians, Slovenians and so forth. After the collapse of Eastern European regimes in 1989, there was a struggle for power in Yugoslavia, eventually leading to war. Nationalism was invoked as an explanation for the breakup of the country but, looking at the process from Breuilly's perspective, actually the struggle for power was the primary driver, and national characteristics were used as a justification. This was most obvious in Bosnia, where Serbians, Croatians and Muslims (not a national group) had long lived together without difficulty. In the Bosnian war, the idea of nations seeking autonomy was the pretext for a bitter quest for power.

Breuilly takes "nationalism" to refer to "political movements seeking or exercising state power" that use a political argument with these three features: (1) there is a nation with its own special features; (2) the nation's interests and values are paramount; and (3) the nation needs to be independent.[4] The key bit of this viewpoint is

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4 Ibid., 2.

that nationalism is all about power, in particular state power.

Another part of Breuilly's argument is that the rise of nationalism occurred along with the rise of modern states, initially in Europe and then worldwide via European colonialism. Without the state, there would be no point of nationalistic fervour. Like Anderson, Breuilly says that people centuries ago, before the rise of modern states, did not think of themselves in terms of nations. Their identification was more local.

Breuilly's analysis of nationalism is based on a wide-ranging examination of movements from around the world, including for example both unification and separation nationalism in Europe in the 1800s, anti-colonialism nationalism in India, Kenya and elsewhere, reform nationalism in China, Japan and Turkey, and nationalism after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Breuilly's perspective can be summed up this way:

Nationalism is not the expression of nationality, if by nationality is understood an independently developed ideology or group sentiment broadly diffused through the "nation." … Rather, an effective nationalism develops where it makes political sense for an opposition to the government to claim to represent the nation against the present state.[5]

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5 Ibid., 398.

My aim in this book is to point out the use of tactics by ruling groups to maintain their power. Breuilly's perspective meshes quite well with the study of tactics, because he's saying that the mobilisation of support for a political movement by reference to national characteristics is usefully understood as a political strategy, not as something inherent in a nation.[6]

Michael Billig and banal nationalism

In his important book *Banal Nationalism,*[7] Michael Billig gives a different perspective than Breuilly. "Banal" refers to things that are ordinary, routine and everyday. Billig argues that nationalism is not just something that is emotional, extreme and usually somewhere else, but is around us all the time even when it is unnoticed: it is banal. He gives the example of the US flag, which is hung from people's homes and printed on T-shirts. Most of these flags and flag images are treated as part of the background of daily life, yet they foster a consciousness of

6 Since writing *Nationalism and the State,* Breuilly's ideas have evolved. See for example "Nationalism as global history," in Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou (eds.), *Nationalism and Globalisation: Conflicting or Complementary?* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 65–83; John Breuilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Breuilly, "Nationalism," in John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, sixth edition), pp. 387–400.

7 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

the nation as integral to the fabric of life. Similarly, in schools around the country, children daily stand, put their hands on their hearts and together recite the pledge of allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

By referring to nationalism as banal, as ordinary, Billig is not saying it has no adverse consequences. As he puts it, "banal does not imply benign."[8] Banal nationalism can be toxic in its own way, blinding citizens to the assumptions underpinning the way they see the world and enabling aggression and wars.

Billig, like other writers on nationalism, notes that just a few hundred years ago very few people had any conception of themselves as members of a nation. In medieval Europe, peasants saw their world as extending only to the groups of people they interacted with and encompassing a limited geographical area without fixed boundaries. Few people living in what is today called France thought of themselves as French. In today's world, in contrast, every bit of land is assigned to one country or another and boundaries are clearly demarcated. The idea that there could be large numbers of people not attached to countries or there could be populated territory not included in a country is hard to grasp.

The contemporary way of thinking about the world is built on assumptions about membership of groups and the division of territories, assumptions that are hard to

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8 Ibid., p. 6.

appreciate because they are unspoken and seldom articulated. When a political leader says "We must protect the French way of life," it is not necessary to spell out that "France" is being distinguished from other distinct countries and that it is reasonable to assume the existence of a "way of life" for everyone encompassed by the adjective "French" despite the vast differences in thought and behaviour between different people implicated in the term. Billig says that, "nationalism is the ideology by which the world of nations has come to seem the natural world—as if there could not possibly be a world without nations."[9]

Billig thus conceives nationalism as something more pervasive and unnoticed that the usual usages by scholars in the field who, like Breuilly, see it as mainly being manifested in challenges to existing states. Much of Billig's book is a critique of scholarship that ignores the routine and fails to examine assumptions underlying the current way the world is organised and thought about. He addresses the claims of postmodernists that national consciousness is being superseded by other forms of identity, and shows postmodernists' failure to consider banal nationalism. He provides a close critique of the work of famous philosopher Richard Rorty, showing Rorty's philosophical pragmatism is built on unacknowledged assumptions about US nationalism. Billig's many examples include several that I address in later chapters, including language and sport.[10]

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9 Ibid., p. 37.

10 Billig's ideas have been the subject of critical attention. See for example Michael Skey, "The national in everyday life: a

What Billig calls nationalism I might call statism or countryism or country-centredness, but the terms are less important than the basic idea, namely that people think of the world as divided into countries and of themselves as members of a country or a nation.

Conclusion

There are several common themes in the books by Anderson, Breuilly and Billig. One key point is that the idea of nations is quite new, no more than two or three hundred years old. Earlier than this, and even today in many parts of the world, people have not thought of themselves as part of a nation or a nation-state. The idea that the world is divided up into geographically bounded areas, each one administered by a central government, is new historically. What seems natural today would have seemed unnatural, even incomprehensible, to earlier generations.

All three authors see the rise of the idea that people have national identities as happening in parallel with the rise of the state system. States rule over people living within territories; national identity helps make this seem natural and inevitable rather than arbitrary and open to challenge.

Another key point is that effort is required to get people to think in terms of nations, states, borders, citizen-

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critical engagement with Michael Billig's thesis of *Banal Nationalism*," *Sociological Review,* Vol. 57, No. 2, 2009, pp. 331–346, and Michael Billig, "Reflecting on a critical engagement with banal nationalism—reply to Skey," pp. 347–352.

ship and all the other facets of the system of states. Sometimes the efforts are strenuous and obvious, such as during wartime, but more commonly the usual ways of thinking about the world are reinforced by education, media and everyday rituals.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the state system is a power system. It is political, in the sense of involving the exercise of power. Many individuals and groups have a stake in the way the world is organised and resist those who promote alternatives. One of the key uses of power is to encourage people to think that the system is natural and that alternatives are impractical.

The body of writing about nationalism and states is enormous and there is no possibility of even trying to summarise it. My goal in *Patriotism Tactics* is to point to ways in which governments and their supporters encourage people to think in terms of countries and from the point of view of governments. In doing this, I am drawing on several sources. One is the body of research about nationalism, and Billig's *Banal Nationalism* is as close as any treatment to my starting point. Another source is the analysis of strategy and tactics in the social world; James Jasper's book *Getting Your Way* is the pioneering treatment, showing how social dynamics can be analysed in terms of strategy.[11] Finally, I have drawn on my own study of tactics against injustice, which offers a framework for understanding the methods used by powerful groups to reduce outrage over injustice, and which can be used more

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11 James M. Jasper, *Getting Your Way: Strategic Dilemmas in the Real World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

generally to look at tactics adopted by rulers.[12] My aim is to use a range of topics to illustrate how it is possible to see tactics that serve to maintain systems of rule simply by looking at familiar things in a different way, and possible to imagine ways to take action towards alternatives.

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12 Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). See, more generally, "Backfire materials," http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html.