NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

M. Huysseune
Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

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Summary

Nationalism is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Expressing both claims for recognition and for superiority, it is marked by an intrinsic moral ambivalence. Politically, its emergence has coincided with the affirmation of liberal and democratic ideas, and in particular the notion of popular sovereignty. It expresses the political identification of citizens with their state, and the policies of governments to reinforce such identification. It is based on the existence of a shared national identity, relying on the presence of historical, cultural, language or religious bonds. However, because of the imperfect congruence of states and national identities, nationalism has also developed outside and against nation-state, to affirm the rights of minorities.

Since the international system is based on sovereign nation-states as its constituent units, nationalism is an intrinsic feature of it, often underestimated by International Relations theory. Nationalist policies of states, the competition for economic and political power in an international context where economic and political power differentials remain outspoken, contribute to the persistence of nationalism. Because statehood is the established form of recognition of national identities, the international system is moreover confronted with a permanent tension between maintaining the stability of the state system, and claims of minorities for statehood. While reluctant to accept such claims, except in the specific case of colonies, the international system has been more attentive to the cultural, linguistic and religious rights of minorities.

In the present political context, where nation-states remain the basic units of the

international system, the demise of nationalism does not seem to be an immediate prospect. Policies defending the rights of minorities, recognizing their identities, respectful of claims of groups to acquire a public voice, and providing for the diminishment of unequal access to political power and of economic imbalances may nevertheless contribute to pacify nationalism.

1. Nationalism and National Identities

1.1. Outlining the Meaning of National Identities and Nationalism

Nationalism is routinely described as an essentially contested concept, an indication of the multiplicity of meanings the term may assume. In the twentieth century, nationalism has found such diverging expressions as the political struggle for independence of colonies, the struggle of minorities for their political and cultural rights, the expansionist politics of states, and irredentist and secessionist movements. Nationalism may be deployed both by established nation-states and by minorities challenging the political status quo. In all these cases, however, it is based on the existence of a shared national identity. In their articulation, such national identities may rely on the presence of historical, cultural, language or religious bonds. Nationalism as the political and public expression of national identity thus includes a doctrine, cultural practices, and sets of symbols, myths and rituals, which may express a multiplicity of aspirations and of intellectual and cultural elaborations.

Overviews of the forms of nationalist movements and of the national identities they have articulated certainly reveal their enormous variety. Historical and political contingencies play an important role in this process. The specific characteristics of nationalist movements are in general strongly determined by the travails of political history. Anti-colonial nationalism thus appropriated and transformed a political doctrine originally matured in the metropolises. The emergence of the nationalism of cultural and ethnic minorities is to be understood as a reaction against the policies of cultural homogenization of nation-states. State nationalism can be interpreted both in light of internal political dynamics (i.e. attempts to overcome internal social, political and cultural divides), as well as of the external context of economic and political competition.

Nationalism is an intrinsic part of the international system. The emergence of nationalism transformed the international system from a body of states governed by dynastic sovereigns to a body of nation-states. This process started in Europe in the early nineteenth century and has gradually incorporated the whole world. The process of decolonization has effectively universalized the principle of sovereign nation-states as constituent members of the international system. States have been assumed to exercise sovereignty over their territory, and have at least symbolically been understood as equal partners of the international community, whatever their real difference in power may be. States are at the same time envisioned as nation-states, communities of citizens, based on a shared sense of belonging and solidarity, a national identity that creates loyalty to the state, a social pact that cannot easily be dissolved. While the growing impact of supra-national organizations and of forms of global governance have undoubtedly limited the sovereignty of nation-states, this process has as yet not led to a decline of the

relevance of national identities and of nationalism.

The difficulties of defining national identities is the cause of the continuously disruptive nature of nationalism. The equivalence between states and nations can in fact not be taken for granted. Although many states have effectively been able to create a national community, this success has been far from universal. The convergence of state and nation has been particularly problematic in Africa, because of the artificiality of state borders inherited from the colonial period. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia has, however, revealed the more general significance of this problem. In almost all nation-states, the presence within state borders of cultural and linguistic minorities has led to alternative articulations of nationhood. Although not necessarily political in their origins, such affirmations of sub-national identities have almost always led to nationalist political mobilization, since they were confronted with states incarnating different identities and frequently implementing policies of cultural homogenization. Such nationalist mobilizations have certainly not always made claims for independent statehood. The normative predominance of the nation-state model has, however, enhanced claims to independent statehood, since statehood implied the supreme recognition of the existence and the status of nations. Definitions of national identities that do not correspond with presently existing states may challenge the existing international order, either by national minorities striving for independence, or by states claiming the inclusion of territories inhabited by co-nationals.

Nationalism undoubtedly has a strong political dimension, and as such it is a modern phenomenon. Although it has pre-Enlightenment roots, its political emergence has historically paralleled the affirmation of popular sovereignty. The principle at the basis of popular sovereignty, i.e. that the question of government ought to be decided by the governed, subverted the principle of dynastic authority, which located sovereignty in the person of a hereditary monarch, and transformed subjects into citizens. The first affirmations of this principle are to be related with the revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that subverted the political order of the Ancien Régime: the American and French Revolution, and the independence wars of the Spanish colonies in South and Central America. Popular sovereignty, while understood as a universal principle, in practice became embedded in specific states, where subjects became transformed into citizens, and the state into a nation-state. The doctrine of national self-determination applies in fact on a community level the liberal doctrine of personal self-determination. The emergence of the nation-state thus concurred with the gradual transformation of subjects into citizens. At the same time, the political pressure of radical democratic and socialist tendencies stimulated states to reinforce the identification of citizens with their nation, frequently through policies of cultural homogenization. The example of these states (e.g. France, the United States) was soon followed by their more autocratic neighbors, who started (e.g. in Germany and Russia) to cultivate nationalism and nationalizing policies as a means to counter democratic subversion.

Nationalism has a second root in reflections on cultural specificity, which originated in Germany during the second half of the eighteenth century as a reaction to the cultural hegemony exercised by France. This version of nationalism was greatly enhanced as the French Revolution led to expansionist wars of annexation, and reactions against French

politics took the form of nationalism. The growing tendency (in the nineteenth century) of states to implement policies of cultural homogenization enhanced the spread of cultural nationalism in minority groups not possessing a state, and highly contributed to their political mobilization in nationalist movements.

The multi-faceted nature of nationalism undoubtedly complicates its definition and conceptualization. Nationalism can certainly not only be understood as a specific political doctrine. Although it is possible to retrace an intellectual tradition of nationalism, critics have frequently pointed to its mediocrity compared to major political-intellectual traditions such as liberalism and Marxism. This observation can perhaps best be understood as acknowledging the limited importance of an independent tradition of nationalist theory. While the intellectual history of nationalism includes contributions by prominent thinkers such as the German Johann Gottfried von Herder and the British John Stuart Mill, nationalism was for neither of them a central concern. Even for a rare thinker who concentrated strongly on nationalism, like the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini, his nationalism was embedded in his humanitarian republican beliefs. Nationalists tend to insert their considerations on identity within a broader vision of society. Their programs of nation-building and of national development are moreover articulated with reference to a more global context. Nationalism has frequently appeared in combination with an intention to modernize the nation, especially in those with a less developed economy concerned with catching up with economically more advanced nations.

Nationalism is thus multifaceted and contingent in its contents and in its articulations, since it tends to appear in combination with an extremely wide variety of other doctrines, from Marxism to liberalism to racism. This variety reflects the manifold purposes of nationalist mobilization, and the plurality of meanings attributed to nation-building. Its earliest manifestations in the nineteenth century were strongly concerned with national sovereignty, and hence with liberalism. The racial nationalism of the late nineteenth century functioned as an expansionist colonialist ideology, but also a tool in intra-European power struggles. Anti-colonialist nationalism, oriented against imperial powers and an international order perceived as unjust, frequently made use of a socialist and sometimes Marxist language. The articulation of nationalism in combination with universalist political doctrines reveals how it includes a reflection on the international geopolitical order, and a program to stabilize, reform or challenge this order. The variety of doctrines in which nationalist claims and grievances are articulated once again draws attention to its contingent and political nature.

Nationalism has proved its Medusa-like capacity for survival. Its affirmation in the nineteenth century belied the cosmopolitan aspirations of the Enlightenment. Similarly, recent expectations about the emergence of a global culture, or about the creation of post-modern and post-national identities, have not yet materialized. By its ubiquitous presence and its persisting strength in the post-Cold War world, nationalism has once again thwarted cosmopolitan expectations on its gradual demise. The very fact that the international system is constituted of sovereign nation-states places nationalism in its center, both as a defining and as a potentially disruptive feature, apt to reemerge whenever this system is destabilized, as has been the case in the post Cold-War period. This subversive power of nationalism is itself a consequence of the impossibility to

realize an exact correspondence between the division of the world in sovereign states and the multiplicity of frequently overlapping nationalist claims. The multiplicity of possible definitions of nations (as political and/or as cultural entities), and the generally extremely difficult territorial delimitation of groups claiming nationhood complicate an issue which is in itself already complex because of the drastic redrawing of boundaries it would require.

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Biographical Sketch

Michel Huysseune is lecturer in Political Science at the "Vrije Universiteit Brussel" and at "Vesalius College" (Brussels, Belgium). His research focuses on nationalism and he has recently published *Modernity and Secession. The Social Sciences and the Political Discourse of the Lega Nord in Italy* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2006).