
Nationalism or Supra-nationalism in the 21st Century?

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Abstract: In the 21st century characterized by unprecedented information technology, mass communication, great strides in immigration and cultural differences, it is being argued that the world is moving towards larger units of human associations and global identities (supranationalism) which make nationalism with its defense of the local, wither away or at best continue to exist but in a minor and secondary role. The paper shall argue that although there are greater advances in information technology and mass communication, it is this same 'baggage' which nationalists over the world are using to instill and spread national values, sentiments and beliefs in their populations. Therefore, what we will continue to witness is not the supersession and transcendence of nations and nationalism but the interdependence of nationalism and supranationalism. These two will continue to feed into each other and the suggestion that nationalism is obsolete and fit for the dustbin of history is as fallacious as the notion that the 21st century is a 'post-national' age.

Nationalisme ou supranationalisme au 21^{ème} siècle

Résumé: Au 21^{ème} siècle caractérisé par une remarquable technologie de l'information, une communication de masse, et des avancées dans l'immigration et les différences culturelles, il est indiqué que le monde évolue vers des unités d'associations humaines et des identités globales élargies (supranationalisme) qui font que le nationalisme recule ou, continue à exister, mais de manière insignifiante. Le papier soutient que, bien qu'il y ait de profondes améliorations en technologie de l'information et en communication de masse, il est ce même 'slogan' que les nationalistes du monde emploient pour répandre des valeurs, des sentiments et des croyances nationales dans leurs populations. Par conséquent, ce que nous continuerons à être témoin n'est pas le remplacement ou la transcendance des nations et du nationalisme mais l'interdépendance du nationalisme et du supranationalisme. Ces deux continueront à s'impliquer, l'un dans l'autre, et la suggestion que le nationalisme est désuet et est convenable pour la poubelle de l'histoire est aussi fallacieuse que la notion que le 21^{ème} siècle est l'âge post-national.

Introduction

This paper examines the notion that nationalism is under siege and will eventually collapse or be subsumed in the discourses of supranationalism and globalisation. It will contest the construction of supranationalism and show how supranational identities are themselves created through the prism of nationalism. The paper further posits that nationalism and supranationalism complement each other.

The discourse of nationalism is far from being clear cut and homogeneous. It is a variegated discourse as there are various kinds of nationalisms. There are also multiple scholarly definitions of nationalism. To Smith (2001:13), nationalism is an ideology that 'places a nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote these goals: national autonomy, national unity and national identity.' He further suggests that it is an ideology that manifests itself through national symbols such as national anthems, currencies, cultural myths and symbols. Even in international

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competitions in games such as rugby, cricket and tennis embody the spirit of nationalism. Breuilly (1993) sees nationalism as a form of politics and also a political doctrine elaborated by intellectuals. It is about politics and power, he further argues. Breuilly (1993:1) indeed sounds essentialist as he suggests that ‘nationalism is used to refer to political units seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments.’

In nationalist ideology, race, class, language and culture among others constitute different aspects of the same entity –the nation. It is therefore, inappropriate to classify nationalisms according to a particular aspect. In view of this, romantic, linguistic, ethnic and anti-colonial nationalisms all overlap and are interrelated. They tend to share the same objectives and on that basis, this paper will consider nationalism in general terms as opposed to specific forms or even its instances.

I. Origins of Nations and Nationalism

Various paradigms have been used in approaching the debate regarding the origins of nations and nationalism. We will consider in this paper, the paradigms of the perennialists and classical modernists. According to Smith (1998:1):

Historians vary on the exact moment of nationalism’s birth but social scientists are clear: nationalism is a modern movement and ideology which emerged in the latter half of the 18th century in western Europe and America and which after its apogee in two world wars is now beginning to decline and give way to global forces which transcend the boundaries of nation state.

This view sees nations and nationalism as a very recent phenomenon. Hobsbawm (1990), a classical modernist, believes that the current spate of nationalism is even temporary as we move towards even larger units of human associations (supranationalism). Nationalism to him will continue to exist but only in a minor and secondary role and such a position points to the complexity of issues surrounding the so-called transcendence of nations and nationalism. It even foregrounds the near impossibility of transcending the nation and nationalism. The paradigm of classical modernism can be said to be the polar opposite perennialist assumptions and ideas, which regard nations and nationalism as more or less persistent and recurrent phenomena of all epochs. Perennialists therefore, contend that nations and nationalism are as old as humankind and are immemorial and of a primordial character.

Because of these contending positions, it is likely that the notion that nations and nationalism are transient is a seriously contested issue. For instance, Breuilly (1993:340) admits that although in the first edition of his book, he suggested that nationalism as a specific form of politics was largely finished, he has since revised this position to declare that; ‘nationalism had apparently re-emerged so strongly in contemporary society’. Smith (1998:ix) concurs and argues that “nationalism has shown no sign of abating and has instead flourished more widely and powerfully than at any period since the Second World War”. This is in contrast to many who believe that, after the two world wars, the collapse of the former

Soviet Union and the decolonisation in Africa and elsewhere, nationalism is now beginning to decline and give way to global forces which transcend the boundaries of nation-states - resulting in supranational identities and/or continents free of national lines of division. It is time nationalism is thrown into the dustbins of history and its place filled by supranationalism. For those rooted in classical modernity, among their many assertions regarding the transcendence of nations and nationalism is the argument that:

Nations are not deeply rooted in history, but are notable consequences of the revolution that constituted modernity and as such tied to their features and conditions, with the result that once these features and conditions are transformed, nations would gradually wither away and be superseded. (Breuille, 1993:21-22)

Implied in this argument is that nations will eventually wane and cease to exist. This argument foresees the demise of a nationalist ideology inevitably accompanying the withering away of nations.

Another argument put forward by modernists draws from the notion of social construction and how all constructs are subject to deconstruction. This argument sees both nations and nationalisms as social constructs as well as, 'cultural creations of modernity, designed for an age of revolution and mass mobilization, and central to the attempts to control these processes of rapid social change. (Breuille, 1993:22)

Therefore, once the purposes for which nationalisms were designed are over, nationalism will die hence, classical modernism's objection to the perennialist view of nationalism as being immemorial. To Horsman et al (1994), in today's globalisation: characterized by broader agendas, vast transnational markets and power blocks, nations and nationalism will be revealed as transient forces, which are fast becoming obsolete. The role of nationalism is seen to be diminishing in the era of the twenty first century with the ever intensification of globalisation.

II. Beyond the Nation-State and Nationalism?

Many foresee the inevitable supersession of nation-states and nationalism by broader supranational or global identities in a post-national era. Campbell (2007) has this to say about supranationalism:

Indeed, supranationalism as an ideology looks to the replacement of the nation-state paradigm by a more pluralistic framework within which sub-nations, ethnic minorities, religious communities and indigenous peoples could have the opportunity to come more into their own as the majority dominated democratic nation-state cede control of the spheres of prior dominance. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/supranationalism>)

Clearly, the supranational agenda seeks to go beyond 'nation-statism', which tends to emphasise the legitimacy of the state through galvanizing political support and patriotic behaviour. The nation-state therefore stresses the values and ethos of the cultural nation which supranationalism seeks to transcend. Of the inevitable transcendence of nation-states, Smith (1998:214) has this to say:

The general belief in supersession has three main components which are conflated: first, the imminent demise of the 'nation-

state', second, the supersession of nationalism and third, the transcendence of ethnicity. Each of these trends, it is argued, is gathering pace, as nation-states, nationalist ethnicity are being more or less gradually replaced by supranational and/or global identities and assumptions.

To scholars of a post-modernist persuasion, globalisation is producing 'non-national nations' and nationalism is already decomposing matter. In other words, the nation-state and nationalism will wither away in the face of political and economic dependence, mass communication and cultural hybridization. Given this argument, it remains to be seen whether nations and nationalism can be totally superceded by broader associations in an era that can also be termed 'post-national'.

III. Nationalism Will Never Die

Nationalism as a movement or ideology is as well a phenomenon of the modern world as of the ancient. It will continue to exist as long as mankind live and form associations to question injustices in societies and nations. While Hobsbawm (1990) argues that movement towards larger human associations points to the temporality of nations and nationalism, Smith (2001) posits that the loss of sovereignty does not necessarily entail the withering away of nationalism. These two positions highlight the complexity of the debate, which marries crises and nationalist sentiments and insists that nationalism will only be opposed and not wane and wither away. Breuilly (1993:25) says:

Nationalism redefines the nature of legitimate authority and is frequently associated with political change – nationalist politics are typically crisis politics and crises threaten the status quo. Consequently we would expect to find an established ruling class opposing nationalism.

In this context, 'ruling class' can be understood to be the dominant class, institution, country or continent and a nationalist is one who questions the status quo. For instance, in Africa leaders of liberation movements were often labelled nationalists. In today's discourse 'nationalist' would refer to people who are opposed to Euro-American hegemony. Recently, American President Bush has claimed that President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is destabilizing the region. The reasons are Hugo's policies of nationalization. He is evidently threatening the status quo, more so the globalisation agenda, which the Venezuelan leader correctly understands to be a phenomenon linked to imperialism and to the increasing hegemony of a particular centre and the diffusion of American and European consumer values and lifestyles. His nationalization drive like that of Nyerere's Ujamaa, in development theory is an acceptable drive toward rejecting the modernization theory, which posits that for the periphery to develop, it needs expertise, ideas and technology from the centre. Therefore, in the context of the modernization-dependency binarism, the beauty of Chavez's nationalization policy is in embracing the dependency theory, which looks inside for ideas, expertise and technology. The rejection of Euro-American influence by some nations at the periphery points to the insurmountable task of dismantling nationalism and this is

one reason why nationalism will not die. The Iranian leader has managed to turn the country's nuclear research programme into a nationalist issue with support far beyond that of conservative Mullahs. It is therefore clear that the nationalist ideology also tends to be a legitimating factor and on closer analysis supranational bodies lack this legitimacy. Campbell (2007) says they cannot realistically find that legitimacy through democratic accountability and would, in any case, likely become states not supra-states if they succeeded in so doing.

One other factor that militates against the supersession of nations and nationalism is the issue of national identities. A classic example of a supra-nation that for some time succeeded in suppressing national identities is The Union Of The Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), but it could not do this to eternity. The nations finally came out to claim their birthright, which is one of the many goals of nationalism. Since the unravelling of the USSR some fairly new states have been created representing nations which had been suppressed in the empire. The African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) are other bodies that promote supranational identities. Nevertheless, there is still acknowledgement of national identities within these bodies. The AU and EU still accommodate sub-national identities and cultural differences. For instance, the Bulgarians and the British did not cede their national identities because of the EU membership. The EU citizenship therefore merely complements the existing national citizenships as the nation is still taken as the point of reference throughout the EU block. Writing against the near impossible task of suppressing national identities and creating a common European identity, Guibernau (1996:114) argues that:

The engineers of the new Europe will have to look for common European trends and design a myth of origin, rewrite history, invent traditions, rituals and symbols that will create a new identity. But even more important, they have to discover a common goal, a project capable of mobilizing the energy of European cultures.

There is clearly need to create a common identity if a supranational association is to work. It is therefore, most unlikely that a European federal state will supplant the existing national states.

On the aspect of mobilizing cultures, the claim that mass communication and electronic technology create a global consumerist culture that is making national cultures increasingly similar may sound convincing, but the technology and mass communication presented as universal, still bear the imprint of its origins. Invariably, these technologies flow from the US, Japan, Western Europe and more recently China. In fact, Kahan (1968) argues that the chances of securing political solidarity are much greater today in a highly globalised world. Information technology, mass communication, propaganda techniques and public education allow nationalists to instill in their people common values and sentiments, which are national in character. In such a scenario, nation and nationalism far from being in danger of decline are becoming more centralized, co-ordinated and powerful. Besides, as Schesinger (1987) correctly highlights, the electronic media and information technology on which much of the cultural globalisation theory rests, affects society, classes and regions differently and paradoxically, he argues, it is the same electronic media, which is being used to reinforce national identities. Therefore, supranationalism/globalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive. In this scheme of things the very processes of globalisation and the creation of supra-nations are seen to be revitalizing nationalism more than making it obsolete.

Islamic fundamentalism, which we argue is part of Arab nationalism, seems to be furthered by such channels as Al Jazeera and I TV (a South African based Islamic Channel). Arab nationalism is evidently making use of the baggage that comes with globalisation to further its nationalist agenda. In view of this, nationalism is far from dying in the face of global forces and a highly technological world. The more advanced the 21st century is technologically, the more the suicide bombers move from merely using basic bombs to more sophisticated ones.

Bhabha (ed) (1990) argues that the issue of national identity is problematic. He says dualism, the past and the present and the self and the other among other factors characterize national identities and it is this superimposed dualism in his view that fragments the concept of a nation. However, contrary to Bhabha's view, national identity to our understanding does not approximate cultural homogeneity, otherwise the US would not be what it is. We argue in this paper that nationalism actually recognizes diversity and uniqueness within a collective context. Unity and collective cultural activities as tenets of nationalist discourse should not be confused with a drive towards homogeneity. It is not that individual members should be alike but that they should feel an intense bond of solidarity and therefore act in unison on all matters of national importance (Smith, 2001:26).

As we have already suggested earlier on, as long as there is injustice, nationalism will continue to exist. For instance, nationalism derives from the unequal encounter between centre and periphery, an inequality that derives from the uneven exploitation, often-violent imposition of capitalism and unfairness on the periphery. Nationalism therefore derives from such economic systems as capitalism, regional inequalities and class conflict – conflicts between underdeveloped people and the developed regions. In light of this argument therefore, we argue that as long as there are conflicts, nationalism will subsist.

More interestingly Gellner (1983) sees a relationship between nationalism and modernity and argues that nations/nationalism are functional for the modern, industrialized societies. He sees nationalism as being indispensable in a modern society because industrial growth, he adds, requires both elements of fluidity and patterned homogeneity, individual mobility combined with cultural standardization elements that do not exist outside a nation and nationalism. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to divorce nations and nationalism from high industrialization. Commenting on Gellner's theory on nationalism and industrialization, Smith (1998:36) concurs and adds that Gellner's theory:

Retains a powerful and relevant thesis, which seeks a deep and underlying cause for the impregnability of nation and the recurrence and proliferation of nationalism in the modern world.

Essentially Gellner posits that we cannot do away with nationalism as long as we live in an industrialized society. Gellner's theory is therefore a variant of classical modernism, which derives the rise, and spread of nation and nationalism from the social and economic consequences of capitalism. Having said that, the symbols, myths and cultural artifacts that we live with bear testimony to the invincibility of nation and nationalism. The next segment illustrates and discusses some of these and their bearing on the supercession debate.

IV. Symbol, Myths and the Nationalism Agenda

Admittedly, in the globalisation age on whose back supranational identities ride, nations and nationalism are endangered species, but far from being irrelevant and extinct. Neo-liberals and pro-globalisation activists call for the collapsing of boundaries, which in essence means the consolidation of a global economy marshalled by Western Europe and America. Against this background, it is not surprising that some scholars have begun to write about a 'post-national age', which means that the nation-state and nationalism are being superseded, or at the very least, becoming increasingly irrelevant and anachronistic to the so-called modern world in which we live.

Yet, confronted with numerous myths and symbols, cultural or otherwise, the practicality and reality of the diminishing role of nation and nationalism becomes questionable. Adolph Hitler championed the purity and superiority of the Arian race (a racial myth) and using that, created Nazi Germany. The Jewish nation is held together courtesy of numerous myths ranging from those of creation and sharing a common ancestry in Abraham. Today the Egyptian pyramids stand out as monumental cultural symbols and rallying point is a collective identification with a civilization that built the pyramids. In Zimbabwe, the Great Zimbabwe monument and the cultural artifacts originating thence, most notably the Zimbabwe Bird, illuminate a Zimbabwean national identity. In spite of these glaring instances of symbolic nationalism, preachers of the new world order seem oblivious of their relevance. Ironically, even America, which encourages the collapsing of boundaries and nationalism, is at the forefront of instilling nationalism in its citizens. The ubiquitous American flag, a symbol of American nationalism is showing that the country is not yet ready to let go of its nationalism.

Conclusion

It has emerged in this discussion that supranational bodies cannot possibly usurp the powers of the nation-state for eternity. At the same time, while the global forces seem to be moving us towards supranational associations, this ideology actually threatens the existing diversity embodied in nations without creating or enabling new sources of identification to thrive in the face of globalisation. Globalisation, far from endangering nationalism seems in reality to be superintending the re-emergence and consolidation of nationalism. The nation is also viewed as the proper framework within which industrialization and social development can take place. The assumption by some scholars that nation and nationalism are the antithesis of globalisation does not rest on solid ground. In fact nations, nationalism and globalisation co-exist and have a symbiotic relationship as they continually feed into each other.

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