

Political Theory

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'Nationalism and the Case of Distorted Liberalism'

In the introduction to his *Democracy and Power*, Brian Barry argues that

'... in political theory it is just as important to discredit false theories as it is to formulate true ones. For nothing is more dangerous than to act with the confidence that comes from having a theory when that confidence is in fact unfounded.'¹

As far as I can see, one of these false and dangerous theories, which seems to be very rooted in contemporary political theory, is a theory which I shall be referring to as 'distorted liberalism'. As I hope to show, the attitude of this theory to different questions concerning nations and nationalism is far from being liberal, though it is usually labeled as such, either by its own disciples or by external critics. I shall begin my discussion by presenting the contradictory nationalist and liberal conceptions of the nation and continue by analysing their distinct justifications of national self-determination.² I shall then conclude by showing that on its face 'distorted liberalism' accepts the liberal conception of the nation, and thus could be seen as liberal, while adopting a nationalist perception when dealing with self-determination, thus departing from liberalism.

Contemporary scholars of nationalism often claim that nationalism is a protean doctrine, as distinct nationalisms define their relevant nations as such by employing different criteria: in some cases the nation is defined as a linguistic group, sometimes as a cultural body, a race, a collective with common history and so forth.³ However, it seems that the common denominator of all nationalisms, and therefore the nature of nationalism in general, applies to their conception of the nation as a sort of extended family. Before elaborating this issue, the reader should note that by 'nationalism' I do not refer to theories of nationalism but to actual nationalist movements and thinkers. As Barry indicates, quite justly, I believe, there is a big gap between 'real-world' nationalism and the understanding of nationalism by 'academics sympathetic to it'.⁴ If we are to understand how nationalism in the 'real-world' sees the nation, then, we ought to look at the real phenomenon.

When was nationalism born? In so far as we are looking for the first time that the concept appeared, we ought to go back to Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder,

¹Brian Barry, 'Introduction', *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory 1*, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 2.

²Notice that political self-determination does not necessarily require a sovereign state. See David Miller, *On Nationality*, Clarendon Press, 1995, p.11, and R.Higgins, *Problems and Process*, Clarendon Press, 1994, chapter 7.

³See Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp.7-13.

⁴Brian Barry, 'Statism and Nationalism: A Cosmopolitan Critique', unpublished paper, London, 1996, p.6.

Samuel Hugo Bergman tells us, was the first to use the term nationalism (*Nationalismus*) while applying it to *Volk*, which emphasises the organic nature of a people.⁵ For Herder, the nation

‘... is a natural creation. He regarded nationalities not as the product of men, but as the work of a living organic force that animates the universe ... National culture ... is, as Herder puts it, ‘inexpressible’ and closed to foreign eyes ... We can assimilate or adopt what is similar to our nature and remain cold, blind, and even contemptuous of and hostile to anything which is alien and distant’.⁶

The nation, then, is a natural and organic entity to which people belong, as relations of parts to a whole, independently of their will, choice, or consciousness. In other words, national belonging is an ascribed status, one that is a matter of birth. The familial connotation is quite clear, and indeed Herder defined the nation as a sort of extended family: ‘a nationality is as much a plant of nature as a family, only with more branches’.⁷ But this relation between the family and the nation is far from being unique to Herder’s ideas. Leonard W. Doob, for instance, argues that the understanding of the nation as a family is in fact the basic idea of nationalism in general:

‘... patriotism and nationalism are almost always extolled through the use of some sort of familial metaphor. In fact almost anyone who has ever written on patriotism and nationalism contends that much of their strength can be traced to such symbolism, which in turn exists because of a close connection in fact between nation and family ... Members of the nation are really considered to be a family, or they are viewed as though indeed this were the actual situation.’⁸

Since nationalism equates the nation with the family, in the sense that nationality is understood as ‘... an involuntary fate which is imposed upon the individual like a beautiful or an ugly body’,⁹ we could conclude that what characterises the nationalist conception of the nation in general is its understanding of nations as

‘... “objective” (that is, ontologically independent of individual-subjective-volitions) social forces which act through and move individuals, who are in turn regarded as their vehicles and representatives. The behavior of individuals and their beliefs, in this framework, are determined by this “objective” reality ...’.¹⁰

For Herder, as for some other nationalists, the organic nature of the nation is

⁵Samuel Hugo Bergman, *A History of Philosophy*, in Hebrew – Jerusalem, Bialik Institution, 1978, pp.94-95. Note: I will continue to use the term ‘nation’ rather than ‘Volk’ since this is the common term in English, as different thinkers use it even when referring to Herder and other scholars with similar ideas of the nation.

⁶Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country*, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp.121-123.

⁷Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in *ibid*, p.123.

⁸Leonard W. Doob, *Patriotism and Nationalism*, Yale University Press, 1964, pp.183-184.

⁹Carl G. Jung, quoted in J. Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1973, pp.136-137.

¹⁰Greenfeld, 1995, p.19.

embodied in its unique culture, mainly in its language.¹¹ But for many other nationalist thinkers and movements the national organism is revealed in the group's unique race, history, or religion. Yet each of these aspects, when is employed by a specific nationalism, is understood as an objective entity in-itself, and as such, as an exclusive characteristic of the nation.¹²

Indeed, it seems that different nationalist movements and thinkers do conform to this picture of nationalism, as a doctrine that sees the nation as an objective entity. This could be seen in the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian nationalist,¹³ in the old cult of Nativism and the modern nationalism of Gilberto Freyre in Brazil,¹⁴ Peron's Hispanic nationalism in Argentina,¹⁵ Lithuanian nationalism,¹⁶ or different nationalist movements in Africa.¹⁷ A prominent example for such a conception of the nation could be seen in Japanese nationalism, in which the nation has been understood simply as an extension of the nuclear family, and the nation state as the 'family-state' (*kazoku kokka*).¹⁸

When nationalism, understood as I have described it, deals with self-determination, what attitude might it hold? Following an argument by Ernest Gellner, I would like to suggest that in principle, nationalism could hold two alternative positions to self-determination. In his general discussion about nationalism, Gellner distinguishes between a possible 'universalistic spirit' of nationalism, and what I prefer to call, following Gellner's reference to Mussolini, the *sacro egoismo* version of nationalism.¹⁹ By 'universalistic spirit' of nationalism, Gellner means nationalists 'in-the-abstract' – those who are not engaged to a specific nation, and instead are '... preaching the doctrine for all nations alike: let all nations have their own political roofs, and let all of them also refrain from including non-nationals under it'.²⁰

According to this approach, each nation alike has its right to self-determination, when self-determination is defined as 'external autonomy' and 'internal homogeneity' (when, just to recall, the nation is an objective entity that is based on organic characteristics to which one is born).²¹ In contrast, the *sacro egoismo* version refers to thinkers and movements that are involved in a particular nation and seek to advance solely its own interests and aspirations. Those could preach the right of their own nation to be self determining, while taking the right to intervene in the life of other nations, not in the name of universal values but for the sake

¹¹Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Essay on the Origin of Language', translated and edited by F.M.Barnard, and reprinted in *J.G.Herder on Social and Political Culture*, London University Press, 1969.

¹²See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, Blackwell, 1996, p.67.

¹³See *ibid*, p.101. Cf. M.Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*, Edward Elgar, 1996, pp.6-9.

¹⁴E.Bradford Burns, *Nationalism in Brazil*, Fredrick A.Praeger, 1968, chapters 1-2 & p.65.

¹⁵D.Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina*, University of California Press, 1993: for a discussion about cultural nationalism in Argentina generally, see particularly chapter 2).

¹⁶W.Roszkowski, 'Polish-Lithuanian Relations: Past and Present', in P.Kruger (ed), *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Marburg, Hitzeroth, 1993.

¹⁷C.Rosberg, 'National Identity in African States', *The African Review*, 1971; W.Miles, 'Self-Identity, Ethnic Affinity and National Consciousness: an Example from Rural Hausaland', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 9/4, 1986.

¹⁸Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*, Routledge, 1992, chapter 5.

¹⁹Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, 1983, pp.1-2.

²⁰*Ibid*.

²¹*Ibid*, p.13.

of their own nation (see for example the case of Nigerian nationalism versus Ibo nationalism).

The truth is that I do not know any 'real-world' nationalist who is not engaged to a particular nation. This is simply because such a nationalist would not be a nationalist at all, since not being obliged to a particular nation contradicts the very essence of being a nationalist. However, what I do accept is that, there could be a nationalist who does feel obliged to its nation, yet still believes that each nation deserves its own self-determination. In a way, Herder, Mazzini, and even Carl Schmitt could be regarded as such 'universalists'. In general, then, the nationalist justification of self-determination is based only on the organic nature of the nation. The 'universalistic' version claims that each nation, as an objective entity, has the right to be self-determining. Since part of self-determination is the right to be internally homogeneous, in theory there should not be a problem of secession if each nation really gets its self-determination. However, the problem of national territory remains. As nationalists claim, each nation has its own historical homeland, which usually is understood as a part of the national identity or even as one of the nation's objective characteristics.²² But as facts show, many territories are claimed to be the homeland of more than one nation. As far as I can see, this problem cannot be solved by 'universalist' nationalists, especially if their own nation is involved in such quarrel. At the end of the day, when a 'universalist' of this kind faces a territorial problem, he necessarily turns to the *sacro egoismo* version. As to the *sacro egoismo* version, a nationalist of this kind simply believes that the justification of self-determination is a function of the interests and aspirations of his own nation. The justification, then, is conditional and is dependent upon the nationalist's loyalty.

Obviously, the liberal conception of the nation is completely different from the nationalist one. If we examine the writings of different liberals, either classic or modern ones, we realise that all of them share a common conception of the nation. We could classify the different liberal theories into utilitarian, contractarian or rights theories. Otherwise, we could divide them into deontological, teleological or consequentialist theories,²³ or using any other scale for this classification. Ultimately, what is clear is that liberals as a whole describe the nation in individualist and subjectivist terms, in contrast to the organic and objective conception that is employed by nationalists. The famous definition of the nation that reflects such a liberal conception is of Ernest Renan:

'A nation is a grand solidarity constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again. It supposes a past, it renews itself especially in the present by a tangible deed: the approval, the desire, clearly expressed, to continue the communal life. The existence of a nation (pardon this metaphor!) is an everyday plebiscite; it is, like the very existence of the individual, a perpetual affirmation of life ... A great aggregation of men, with a healthy spirit and warmth of heart, creates a moral conscience which

²²Doob, 1964, pp.183-184.

²³For the differences between these kinds of liberalism, see Michael J.Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self', *Political Theory*12, 1984, p.81. Cf. Stephen Mulhall & Adam Swift, *Liberals & Communitarians*, Blackwell, 1995, pp.43-44.

is called a nation.’²⁴

I find this definition not only liberal but also plausible. First, it is liberal in its individualism. It is individualist as it defines the nation as a group that is based on individuals’ free will to live together and cooperate: ‘the desire, *clearly expressed*, to continue the communal life’. Furthermore, it is a subjective definition, as the nation is not an objective whole to which individuals belong by birth, nor is it a body whose members are understood solely as its vehicles or representatives. Rather, the nation’s very existence is *dependent* upon the individuals, as it is defined as a solidarity between them. In that respect, continues Renan, there is no connection between nations and cultural or racial groups. Instead, the nation is a political, or civil, body:

‘To base one’s policy on an ethnographical analysis means to establish it on a chimera ... race ... has no place in politics ... Let us not abandon the fundamental principle that man is a rational and moral being before he is penned up in this or that language, before he is a member of this or that race, before he adheres to this or that culture. Above the French, German, or Italian culture, there is a human culture’.²⁵

Though basically the nation is an aggregation of individuals, it is not simply ‘a motley multitude’, as Alexis de-Tocqueville put it. It is first and foremost the solidarity between the individuals that defines the nation as such. This fact also turns the definition to a plausible one. Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, argues that subjective definitions of the nation cannot be plausible as they are too voluntarist.²⁶ Yet, I think that Renan’s definition is far from being a good example for this kind of voluntarism. In my opinion, an extreme voluntarism is embodied in theories that define the nation *only* as an aggregation of individuals, without paying any attention to the relations between these individuals (see for example Locke’s *Second Treatise*). Renan’s definition, as we saw, does stress the importance of interrelations *between* individuals as a part of the definition of a nation, and thus avoids the ‘extreme voluntarism’ to which Hobsbawm refers.

Following Renan’s definition it is quite easy to imagine how liberalism would justify self-determination. Barry argues that national self-determination, when by ‘nation’ Barry employs Renan’s definition, is justified when the nation on question answers the ‘individualist principle’:

‘I understand the individualist principle to be that the only way of justifying any social practice is by reference to the interests of those people who are affected by it ... It rules out appeals on behalf of God, Nature, History, Culture, the Glorious Dead, the Spirit of the Nation or any other entity unless that claim can somehow be reduced to terms

²⁴ Ernest Renan, ‘Quest-ce qu’une Nation?’ (1882), in Louis L. Snyder (ed), *The Dynamics of Nationalism*, D. Van Nostrand, 1964, pp.9-10.

²⁵ Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, in *A Reader in History of Political Thought Since the French Revolution*, Jerusalem, 1991, p.187.

²⁶ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, London University Press, 1995, pp.7-8.

in which only individual human interests appear.²⁷

So for liberalism a nation deserves self-determination only if the nation in question takes liberal forms, that is, respects the individualist principle. However, one should note what is concealed by excluding culture, spirit of the nation etc. ('objective characteristics') from being criteria for the justification of self-determination. First, the principle entails that, in order to be suitable for self-determination, a nation should apply to *all* the individuals who are affected by its polity, no matter what their 'objective characteristics' are. So if, for instance, in a particular territory there are more than one nation, and the nation that aspires to self-determination conducts a referendum about its future status, the non-nationals should be included in this referendum on equal terms with the co-nationals. Obviously, if a polity is formed, the different nations within it should try to constitute a common nation, as a nation is defined as a body of solidarity, and solidarity within a polity is not of no account. There should not be discrimination between the individuals according to their membership, nor should one nation assimilate others against their will. What does have to be is an attempt by all to be integrated into the new system, provided that liberal order is preserved. Second, and no less important, the exclusion of the 'objective characteristics' implies that differences between groups or individuals should not result in their interests being weighed differently.

The implication for the question of self-determination is clear. It is not enough that there is a nation that respects the individualist principle, in the sense that it pursues the interests of its members. The content of the interests is significant as well. Therefore, for the liberal, a nation should follow basic and universal human rights that are based on the conception of the individual as an autonomous agent, who deserves to be free so he can follow his interests, including the liberty to change and revise his interests. Assuming that there is a nation whose members share the common desire to prevent women from working (and unfortunately there are examples for that), the liberal could not apply the right of self-determination to this nation. John Rawls, for instance, even implies that there is a good reason, if not a duty, to fight against sovereign states that deprive universal liberties from its individuals in this way.²⁸ If some scholars have accused Rousseau's 'general will' of being an 'enforcement of freedom' (though I do not agree with this accusation), here we are indeed dealing with the claim to 'freedom to be forced', which no liberal can accept.

One version of 'distorted liberalism', to which I will turn now, has been presented by Will Kymlicka in his book *Multicultural Citizenship*, though some of the ideas in this book were implied in Kymlicka's *Liberalism, Community and Culture* as well. Kymlicka deals with minority rights and is often considered as a liberal, notably by himself. The premise of his argument, that is, the definition of a nation, could be regarded as liberal, or at least close to the liberal conception of the nation as I have presented it before. For Kymlicka, a nation is basically a cultural group, yet in culture, including language, he does not refer to an organic body that is closed to outsiders, but to a civic nation, to which one can join, as

²⁷ Brian Barry, 'Self-Government Revisited', in D. Miller & L. Siedentop (eds), *The Nature of Political Theory*, Clarendon Press, 1983, p.124.

²⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971, pp.380-382.

another can leave.²⁹

The basic tension that Kymlicka finds within liberalism is between the value of individual autonomy and the behavior that liberalism is required to adopt towards minority groups that conduct illiberal policies.³⁰ On one hand, Kymlicka adheres to liberal rights and claims that basic human liberties should be given to individuals wherever they live and whatever their community is. On the other hand, he regards any intervention by 'a third party' in the life of another community as an aggression, and thus sees it as an illiberal action:

'Both foreign states and national minorities form distinct political communities, with their own claims to self-government. Attempts to impose liberal principles by force are often perceived, in both cases, as a form of aggression or paternalistic colonialism'.³¹

So the alleged liberal principle of 'not imposing liberalism' is prior for Kymlicka and should subordinate the liberal value of individual rights. In this issue of self-determination, or self-rule, Kymlicka does not only detach himself from liberalism, but also attaches himself to nationalism. First, as Barry indicates, he gives priority to the right for national membership over other rights.³² Moreover, Kymlicka himself stresses in the two books I mentioned before that the very essence of liberalism is freedom, basically freedom of choice as it allows the individual to deliberate about his interests, reflecting and changing them.³³ Now assuming that an individual freely chooses to become a member in an illiberal nation (say that the former singer Cat Stevens, who is called today Yusuf Islam, chooses to leave England for an Islamic state). Naturally, he is going to lose his freedom of choice. As far as I can see, this is exactly what I have called before 'freedom to be forced', and I fail to see any liberal justification for such a membership. But there is another, very surprising, argument that Kymlicka makes. From a liberal perspective, the argument is so shocking that I have to present it as a whole:

'If a minority is seeking to oppress other groups, then most people would agree that intervention is justified in the name of self-defence against aggression. But what if the group has no interest in ruling over others or depriving them of their resources, and instead simply wants to be left alone to run its own community in accordance with its traditional non-liberal norms? In this case, it may be seem wrong to impose liberal values. So long as these minorities do not want to impose their values on others, should they not be allowed to organize their society as they like, even if this involves limiting the liberty of their own members?'³⁴

So oppressing others is wrong and oppressing your own co-nationals is right, as they do not see it as oppression (if ever there is a way to know that in such a

²⁹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Clarendon Press, 1995, p.24.

³⁰ *Ibid*, chapter 8.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.167.

³² Barry, 1996, pp.25-26.

³³ Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp.17-18.

³⁴ Kymlicka, 1995, p.154.

society). This reminds me the words of the poet William Wordsworth, in his *The Convention of Cintra* (1809): 'The difference between inbred oppression and that which is from without is essential.' That is, to be oppressed by my own kind is not as bad as being oppressed by foreigners. But what is this approach if not the 'universalist' version of nationalism that Gellner talks about? This is exactly what Kymlicka's theory implies, and in that it cannot be considered as liberal. It is a distortion of liberalism as it begins with a relatively acceptable device, but ends as no less than 'universalist' nationalism.

In this paper I have tried to present the differences between nationalism and liberalism and to show that they should be seen as contradictory views. I also presented one version of 'distorted liberalism', as this is revealed in Kymlicka's books. I would like to return now to the quotation with which I have begun this study. As Barry says, false theories could be dangerous. Indeed, I believe that Kymlicka's theory, like other versions of 'distorted liberalism' to which I could not refer here, is dangerous.³⁵ It is not only that it distorts liberalism, and thus could lead people to believe that this theory of his is really the liberal one. It also leads different scholars to attack liberalism while actually referring to anything else but liberalism. Critics of liberalism, such as Leo Strauss or Herbert Marcuse, claimed that the main problem of the liberal theory is its relativism. Kymlicka himself tries to show that liberalism is not relativist, yet the implications of his theory, which are attached to what Gellner has called 'universalist' nationalism, say something else. Barry's words, which I quoted at the beginning of the paper, do not only try to save liberalism from different distortions. They are first and foremost anti-relativist, if we are to accept John G. Gunnell's definition of relativism as disconnection between theory and practice, as well as the claim that theories are always contextual.³⁶ Barry gives a lot of weight to theories, as he sees them as part of our practice, not only as something we write about it. Moreover, he does believe in false and true theories, and it is not the context to determine it. As I have said, there is a gap between 'real-world' nationalism and 'academics sympathetic to it'. Thus, theories of nationalism often present the nationalist phenomenon as 'sweet and reasonable', to use Gellner's words, while in real world it is quite the opposite. Kymlicka does the same with liberalism, only here the 'sweetness' turns into something 'bitter'. Indeed, on the surface liberalism for him has a universal meaning, as the premise of his theory glorifies freedom. But since he emphasises that each nation should have its *own* freedom, while the nation's members also have the 'freedom to be forced', the liberal conception of freedom turns to be contextual. Consequently, freedom gets a collectivist meaning rather than individualist and universalist one. If Kymlicka takes his theory seriously, we should refer to it as a relativist theory for its contextualism. If, on the other hand, he does not see the importance of being earnest when theorising, perhaps because he overlooks the essential connections between theory and practice, for this omission he should still be regarded as a relativist.

³⁵see for example Avishai Margalit & Joseph Raz, 'National Self-Determination', *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXVII/9, 1990; Harry Beran, *The Consent Theory of Political Obligation*, Croom Helm, 1987. Cf. Canovan, 1996, pp.9-13.

³⁶John G. Gunnell, 'Relativism: The Return of the Repressed', *Political Theory*, 21, 1993.