

Stray Thoughts Against Nationalism. Or: May You Never Be Homeless

Günther Lanier

To feel and be “at home” and to love “home” is fundamentally human (maybe this is because we are territorial animals). I miss the still cool but sunny early spring days in and around Vienna that are so longingly full of the promise of the reawakening of nature after winter’s death-like sleep. I love and miss Petra and my mother and all my friends. I shall be happy to go hiking in the Alps during summer break.

We like to feel at home, where we know our way around, can interpret people’s actions & words & facial expressions better than elsewhere.

Most of you will have similar feelings about their respective homes.

My home, “where I come from” happens to lie in an entity called Austria. My point here is that whilst the attachment to a home is something “natural”, the attachment to a nation or a state is “artificial”. At best superfluous. And potentially harmful.

Mick has written a response to my FTB article that now gives me new opportunity to write against my favourite topic – patriotism, nationalism, the love of the motherland.

If nationalism – as Mick seems to think – worked towards keeping NATO and Microsoft and the like at bay, then I would be all for it. Only if it did, then NATO and Microsoft and the like could never have grown that big.

Aren’t national elites, in whose interest it is to propagate nationalism amongst the masses, rather outposts, agents, or even employees of Coca Cola, CIA, Hyundai, Tata and company?

My suggestion is to concentrate our watchfulness and analysis on the institutions that matter: states, governments, sub- and supra”national” institutions, lobbyists and the various other players of the corporate business world that grow in importance by the day. Nationalism comes in handy to some of them. But the “nation” in the sense of the community of all citizens rarely matters, hardly counts. The all-pervasive growth of free-market capitalism and, to a lesser extent, democracy, has happened within a nationalist framework. But belonging to a nation is not something fundamentally human (99% of the history of humankind have been nation-less, that should be enough to prove this point). Instead, our need for a home has been stretched and abused. We have been indoctrinated and manipulated into nationalism. And it uses a lot of energy that could be put to much better use. And it is potentially very harmful (wars, anti-minority atrocities – to name but the worst). So let us have as little of it as possible!

Of course, it makes a big difference which passport one holds. To not know what privileges a western passport usually brings with it presupposes a lack of awareness which I am amazed that anyone holds me capable of. At this college, one only needs to look around to see what magnetic attraction emanates from the USA and the like. And look at the brain drain. And look how countries with craved-for citizenship have limited access for foreigners drastically. And they select brutally. Indians reputedly pay around 6000 USD on the black market for a package that provides them with a job in and a visa for the USA. That amounts to the average Indian income of more than ten years.

My sympathy tends to be with diverse subnationalisms – because they fight some powerful national centre that tries to impose its rule on them¹). But if you look more closely, the Basque, Papuan, Tibetan, Quebecois nationalisms are often as bad or worse than those of the Spanish, Indonesian, Chinese, Canadian oppressors they revolt against.

Mick wrote about the differences between the strength of nationalist feelings between the rich industrialised countries and the poor developing countries. I wish he was right about the lack of nationalist sentiment in the 'West'. I have not noticed it. I have, for example, come across many parallels between Austrian and Indian nationalist politics: Here as there, a party with a right-wing nationalist-populist ideology is an important force in the government (dominant in India, equal partner in Austria). A unification, simplification, and thus strengthening of the dominant Indian respectively Austrian culture is what they strive for. And exclusion of Muslims and Christians here, of foreign workers there are core issues to generate party support (see the Ayodhya issue that has made it back into top news headlines here, see the ceiling on issue of work permits there). A few dead gypsies, blacks there, some dead Christians and many more dead Muslims here and a much worsened situation for minorities overall is the outcome of such nationalist party government participation.

Over the last twenty or so years, the world seems to have become a less comfortable, less secure place to live in. This is what is behind the resurgence of the many kinds of nationalism or exclusivist ideologies in so many different places. The Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalist movement including BJP, RSS, VHP, etc.) in India, Blocher's success in last year's elections in Switzerland, the success of so many Muslim fundamentalists (in Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, ...), Mugabe's recently reaffirmed grip on power by means of fanning anti-white sentiment in Zimbabwe, Denmark's and Belgium's strong leaning towards the far right in recent elections, Chavez's Bolivarian machinations in Venezuela ...

With a few exceptions²⁾ nationalists in power have not kept NATO, Microsoft & co at bay any more than others. The BJP for example has an anti-globalisation economic ideology called swadeshi. But the BJP, since in power, has continued to pursue the opening of the Indian economy and society towards the outside world. If anything has changed, then this opening is happening at greater speed now than under previous governments. And the dominantly western world of big business applauds. Or urges more and faster opening up.

Nations in the sense of communities of citizens of a country are largely imaginary entities, figments of the imagination, "artificial" constructions. Their function and purpose is certainly not to help the poor and disadvantaged of this world. Subjects, citizens become a lot more manageable once nationalism has been fed to them.

- 1) To this day I am incapable of criticising Mrdjan for his Serb nationalism: that small country was up against all of NATO's best war (i.e. killing) technology. And more and more of the West's lies are being uncovered: the "massacre of Racak" – which "caused" the beginning of the NATO bombing – seems never to have happened, as has now been revealed ...
- 2) the taliban in Afghanistan for example, but even they use the most modern weapons available on world markets; Bhutan is a praiseworthy exception, but indications are that pressures are mounting and a more unconditional opening up to the world may soon be unavoidable.