

The Twin Chimeras of Lockeanism and Civic Nationalism

Ethan Alexander-Davey

Campbell University

The Virtue of Nationalism

By Yoram Hazony. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018. Pp. 304. \$30.

Yoram Hazony's *The Virtue of Nationalism* is timely. The present global resurgence of nationalism would by itself warrant a reexamination of this principle of politics, much maligned in recent decades in academic circles and in the press. But more importantly, it is a defense of political ideas that are timeless, or at least have a very strong claim to that status. If political history is indeed first and foremost the story of tribes and nations and not other types of human collectives seeking to organize themselves politically, and if, moreover, the grandest multinational empires, although believed by some to have transcended such parochialism, have in fact depended for their cohesion on feelings of loyalty binding together the members of the ruling nationality, then the national factor in politics may well be inescapable. Any approach to politics that discounts nationalism is thus not serious. The author also defends two key normative claims: (1) that national states are superior to universal empires or federations in that they are better able to protect and promote the rights and interests of individuals and groups and (2) that the cultural distinctiveness of nations is a human good in its own right, both in the sense of belonging that it affords to members of particular nations and in the diversity of thought and experience that it supplies to all mankind. "Nations are the wealth of mankind," as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once put it.

Broadly in agreement with Hazony's arguments, I propose here to consider two of his more contentious claims in greater detail—that John Locke's political thought is a failure (Chapter IV) and that the "creedal" or "civic" notions of nationhood advocated by many today are chimerical (Chapter XVI). The first claim is contentious only among the tribes and sects of academia, but given the ubiquity of Locke in university courses on political thought, it may well have implications for the public's understanding of politics, as Hazony suggests (76–77).

Unlike some of the other reviewers here, I find the attack on Locke's legacy refreshing. It may be true that the principles of Lockean liberalism, when viewed in the proper context, are not incompatible with, and are even complementary to, those of nationalism. For those arguments, I simply refer readers to the work of our colleague, David Conway.¹ I, however, find Hazony's critiques especially persuasive. In the first place, Locke is a poor theorist because in the *Second Treatise*, the work of political philosophy for which he is principally known, he "downplayed or entirely omitted essential aspects of human nature and motivation without which no political philosophy can make sense," namely the tribal, national, and spiritual dimensions of the human species (30–31). Second, as Lockean "liberalism has detached itself from its biblical and Protestant origins, its non-nationalist character has become ever more pronounced," and this is seen quite clearly in the way Locke is typically taught and received in the present day (35). Many scholars persist in attempting to salvage Locke's theory in the *Second Treatise* by referencing fragmentary writings that appear to fill important gaps as well as the abovementioned biblical and Protestant context. But for those who concern themselves with early modern political thought, might it not be more beneficial, rather than taking great and continual pains to salvage a bad theory, to instead seek a better one?² One would not have to search very far, and the rewards might easily compensate the effort.

What Hazony calls the “Protestant construction of the West” or the “political thought of the free state” refers to a great body of early modern political treatises, including Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity* and the works of Sir Edward Coke, John Selden, and of figures now grown even more obscure, such as François Hotman or George Lawson. A few of us in recent years have sought to recover the tradition of political thought that these works represent, in which due consideration is given to what Hazony calls “the philosophy of political order,” the investigation into the causes of political order, the origin of the state and the sources of community cohesion.² This is what is missing from Locke’s *Second Treatise*. What is more, the political thought of the “free state” contains most of the matter that was later absorbed by the philosophy of liberalism, concepts such as representative government, limited government, the separation of powers, and individual rights (137). What this Protestant or free-state tradition offers, then, is a political theory that balances the concerns of community cohesion and individual freedom without turning either into an absolute and acknowledges the variety of national cultures and institutions rather than engendering false hope for a single political formula that could embrace all mankind. I agree with Hazony that the older theory is much to be preferred to the purer liberalism that begins with Locke and develops with the likes of Kant, Mill, Rawls, Hayek, and others. The liberal tradition evinces tendencies toward extreme individualism and cosmopolitanism which it would profit mankind to abandon.

The claim that civic, creedal, or neutral conceptions of nationhood are chimerical is as contentious in society at large as it is in academia. As Hazony notes, the post-World War II era saw the development of the theory of the “neutral state,” in which citizens are thought to be bound to each other and to their institutions by a general consensus on certain fundamental human and constitutional rights, a consensus that is understood, moreover, to be free-standing. From the point of view of this “constitutional patriotism,” or the “American creed,” the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of citizens are, or should be, irrelevant. In essence, this is a modern

reformulation of the theory of the state in Locke's *Second Treatise*. Hazony argues that the new version of the theory is no more plausible than the old one. In fact:

What holds a free state together is the mutual loyalty of the members of the majority nation or tribe, and their loyalty to the state—this in addition to the alliances ... that this majority nation or tribe makes with others in order to stabilize and solidify the state. (159)

[W]hat is needed for the establishment of a free and stable state is a majority nation whose cultural dominance is plain and unquestioned, and against which resistance appears to be futile. Such a majority nation is strong enough not to fear challenges from national minorities, and so is able to grant them rights and liberties without damaging the internal integrity of the state. (165)

For Hazony, a free state depends on the existence of a national majority whose members are bound together by commonalities of language, historical memory, religion, and culture. The more successful free states (he names the United States, Britain, France, and Israel) owe their success to the fact that they have a dominant national majority. Failed states such as Iraq and Syria owe much of their failure to their lack of the same. Throughout the nineteenth century and until World War II, all of this was conventional wisdom. Nations taught their citizens to be proud of the historic institutions and heroes of the majority. The immigration policies of all Western countries were designed to preserve the dominance of existing ethnic and linguistic majorities on the strength of the belief that the distinctiveness of the national character was worth preserving and on the assumption that the introduction of too many diverse tribes would create new internal conflicts necessitating more oppressive measures on the part of the government to resolve them.

Today, the conventional wisdom about the relationship between nationality and democracy, presented in Hazony's elegant reformation,

is almost beyond the pale. When left-wing journalists and politicians encounter the notion that democracies might depend on the existence of a core nationality or culture, they are apt to label it nativism, racism, or another term signifying irrational and deplorable hatred. Some political scientists, however, offer support for the old thesis. For instance, Brendan O'Leary, in an analysis of about twenty-five states, concludes that "a stable democratic, majoritarian federation ... must have a *Staatsvolk*, a national or ethnic people, who are demographically and electorally dominant—though not necessarily an absolute majority of the population—and who must be co-founders of the federation." He says that the *Staatsvolk* need not be an absolute majority but also argues that democratic federations with larger *Staatsvölker*, in the range of 60 to 80 percent of the population, or higher, are more "stable and durably democratic" than those with smaller ones.³ If this is true, then it can be entirely rational for policy makers to seek to control and limit immigration, to continue to adorn the institutions of the state with symbols of the national majority culture, and to encourage the cultivation of the type of educator who will want the members of the national majority to be at least moderately proud of their heritage. Such national favoritism benefits all: the national majority, who will not feel threatened with the loss of their nation, and minorities, who cannot be blamed for a loss that was never felt.

Sympathetic as I am to the arguments and aims of Hazon's work, the only possible criticism I could offer here is that he may underestimate the challenges involved in restoring the nationalist order that he so capably defends. If the cohesiveness of a national majority is a precondition for a free state, one cannot avoid the observation that most Western states are undergoing rapid demographic transformations which have already begun to fuel tribal resentments. Some states may already be approaching a point of no return. What is more, the portion of the population of Western states that is "Kantian" in its thinking is by no means trivial. I have in mind here not only the ideologues to whom Hazon refers, who regard the nationalist principle with disgust as something atavistic, "morally immature," but also the larger numbers inhabiting the urban centers of Western states, not necessarily ideologically motivated but

accustomed to life as global consumers and without any national consciousness. According to David Goodhart, the biggest divide in Western nations today is that between the “somewheres” and the “anywheres,” the rural patriots and the urban cosmopolites.⁴ Though their descendants may regret it, the anywheres are confident that their way of life is superior and have great advantages of wealth and control of institutions with which to promote their interests.

Notes

1. David Conway, *In Defence of the Realm: The Place of Nations in Classical Liberalism* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004).
2. For example, see Ofir Haivry, *John Selden and the Western Political Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Ethan Alexander-Davey, “Restoring Lost Liberty in France: François Hotman and the Nationalist Origins of Constitutional Self-Government,” *Constitutional Studies* 2016; 1(1): 37–66; and Alexander-Davey, “Constitutional Self-Government and Nationalism: Hobbes, Locke, and George Lawson,” *History of Political Thought* 2014; 35(3): 458–484.
3. Brendan O’Leary, “What States Can Do with Nations: An Iron Law of Nationalism and Federation?” in *The Nation-State in Question*, eds. T. V. Paul, G. J. Ikenberry, and J. A. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 68.
4. David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).