

Reflections on *The Virtue of Nationalism*

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The Virtue of Nationalism

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Israeli scholar Yoram Hazony has produced a book on the merits of nationalism that is well worth reading. Hazony treats the development of nation-states in early modern Europe as one of the unique, invaluable accomplishments of the West. Moreover, Hazony, who is a proud Israeli Jew, recognizes the value of ethnic and cultural identity in providing cohesion and meaningful self-government to societies throughout the world. It is not “diversity” but homogeneity, as the German political theorist Carl Schmitt pointed out, that distinguishes self-governing peoples from empires. In the absence of a sense of the nation generated and sustained by shared ancestry and shared history, countries become a battlefield for contending ethnicities that require an iron hand to prevent continuing civil strife. The only apparently less coercive alternative, which has come with the expansion of the modern managerial state, is a pervasive form of social engineering. This is intended by globalist elites to “sensitize” majority populations and to render them more accepting of ethnic and lifestyle minorities.

Hazony understands the unpalatable alternatives that now exist for those in the West who reject the nation-state. He is unmistakably critical of the European Union (EU) and rejects the calls for an American empire that have issued periodically from Bill Kristol, Max Boot, and other global democrats. In a footnote the author also examines the efforts of the late Charles Krauthammer to

distinguish between a plan for global democratic hegemony led by the United States and modern imperialism.

Although Krauthammer emphatically denied that he was advocating an American empire since “we do not hunger for new territory,” imperial rule, according to Hazony, can be imposed on the unwilling even if the empire-builders are not overtly annexing new territory. Moreover, other neoconservatives, particularly Boot, are quite open about demanding “an American empire” that would be built on ideological and military control although not outright annexation.

Hazony agrees with John Stuart Mill’s statement that “[i]t is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationalities.” It should be noted those figures whose definitions of nationalism and defenses of nation-states Hazony cites, e.g., Giuseppe Mazzini and Mill, were hardly reactionaries. They were nineteenth-century radicals, and Mill’s defense of nationalism came from a feminist and early advocate of the modern welfare state. Hazony shows us that the nation-state and its defenders occupy a middle ground historically between the prenatal Right and modern multiculturalists and advocates of global institutions.

Hazony at least intermittently gives the impression of throwing together all empires and imperialists into one undifferentiated heap; thus he lists as seemingly related evils neoconservative megalomania, the imperial overreach of the EU, and such creatures of the past as the British, Roman, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. But one has to ask: Were the reasons for these imperial projects always the same? The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a remnant of feudal Europe that persisted down into the modern period. By the late nineteenth century this regime had been given a liberal constitution that protected religious and ethnic minorities, and it stumbled down into the early twentieth century until it fell apart during World War I. American neoconservatives and other globalists are not trying to preserve the past but are calling for a radical transformation of the planet, or at least of those social, political, and cultural institutions that exist on much of the Earth’s

surface. This is certainly not the impulse that drove other empires in other eras.

In fact it would be misleading to push parallels too far. For example, even though the medieval Holy Roman Empire was at times the political arm of a universal church, it is hard to see how its notion of empire had much in common with modern globalist plans. Kudos to Hazony and the German philosopher Hegel for explaining that the nation-state may be the best political means for reconciling freedom and order. Indeed, the development of this institution looks like a providential breakthrough in collective human (really Western) consciousness. But not all imperialist governments looked the same or were equally inhuman.

It pays to look at the context in which supranational governments have functioned to understand their relative value. Some of these governments were the best ones available in a particular time and place. The Hapsburg Empire protected ethnic minorities that were later persecuted under the newly formed nation-states that arose in East Central Europe after World War I. The British Empire often played a similar protective role, and one would be hard-pressed to present the failed or highly problematic nation-states that emerged in Africa after Britain's retreat from empire as politically more beneficial than what preceded them. Not surprisingly, given the Nazi trauma, Hazony treats the unification of Germany and even the German role in World War I as a prelude to Hitlerian tyranny. (One may speculate on whether his noticeable distaste for Germans as well as his demonstrative Jewish nationalism may be a reason that neoconservatives have lined up to blog his book.)

But even if one questions Hazony's claim to recognize Hitler's blueprint in Kaiser Wilhelm's rhetoric or his suggestion that the treatment of German minorities in Eastern Europe after World War I was simply an excuse for "reckless" German expansion,¹ these remarks tell us something about his view of the nation-state. Hazony may be offering a limiting case for his principle of nationalism. Not all countries (presumably not the Germans in the nineteenth century) should have been encouraged to achieve the

national unity that Hazony thinks was a blessing for his own country. That said, Hazony correctly observes that the Nazi experiment in universal biological reconstruction cannot be viewed in the framework of the nation-state. The Third Reich did not represent a supersized nation-state. It was something far less grounded in reality and humanity and exemplified imperialism at its worst. Further, the post-World War II German reaction against Nazi crimes in the form of a “new antinationalism” has been a curse not only for now self-hating Germans but perhaps even more destructively in advancing antinational projects such as the EU. In partial defense of the perpetrators, one might note that the Germans did not undergo a disastrous conversion to antifascism and antinationalism entirely on their own. Years of American and British reeducation efforts imposed during the occupation of Germany helped produce this mentality. In my own writing, I document this laborious process of re-education (*Umerziehung*), the end of which is still not foreseeable. Germany’s conquerors were so successful in reconstructing their subjects that Germans now happily snuff out both liberal freedoms and national identity without foreign intervention.

There are two ideas presented by Hazony that resonated with me for the simple reason that I have been making the same points for decades. One, the author is correct when he tells us that the modern West coming out of early modern Europe is essentially Protestant and that the Reformation more than any other development gave birth to the nation-state. Although the beginnings of the nation-state could already be seen in the new monarchies of the fifteenth century, which were still Catholic, it took the Reformation to remove and replace the medieval paradigm of a universal church and a universal state. The Reformation also encouraged the use of vernacular languages, a development that was advanced by translations of the Bible that were made accessible to the entire community of worshippers. The Protestant practice of creating national churches that offered services in the national language had clear political repercussions. And so did the Protestant rejection of the

indelible character of the clergy and the stress on the “priesthood of all believers” in furthering the idea of a national community of citizens.

Hazoni is also correct to view Kant and his tract *On Perpetual Peace* as a “hateful” attack on the national principle. Remarkably enough, even supposedly conservative Germans now base their defenses of German national sovereignty quite implausibly on Kant and his idea of a universal republic of rational beings. In Kant’s political conception, however, there are no nations and peoples. There are only collections of autonomous individuals who must educate themselves to be governed by universal rational principles. Only in the “republic of reason,” stripped of national specificity, can humankind allegedly achieve perpetual peace in a world community of rationalists. Hazoni finds echoes of Kant’s abstract, rationalistic universalism in proclamations now being issued by international bodies. These bodies, as represented by the EU, are typically at war with the concept of the nation-state.

Equally important, Hazoni observes in this rejection of the nation-state a tendency to link Western nation-states to the crimes of the Nazi regime. Presumably only a universal state, or at least a government in which Western countries abandon their nationhood, can protect us against “another Auschwitz.” Therefore, Western countries that persist in their nationalist mindset are toying with disaster. To his credit, Hazoni tells us a truth that most Jews outside his country adamantly refuse to hear: “If Germany and France have no right to exist as independent states, why should Israel? And if so many are prepared to remain dry-eyed on the day that Britain and the Netherlands are gone, why should they feel differently about Israel?”(208) Those Jews who cheer on the victory of multiculturalism in gentile lands but who hope to preserve the national principle in Israel are not only applying a hypocritical double standard but also pursuing a course that, according to Hazoni, will delegitimize a Jewish nation-state while sowing discord elsewhere.

Note

1. Kaiser Wilhelm's oratory during World War I was no more outrageous than the jingoistic rhetoric that emanated from the other side, particularly French politicians. Nor were German attempts to crack down on antiwar dissent even a fraction as bad as what they were in France and the United States. The attempts by the Weimar Republic to deal with the oppression of millions of Volksdeutsche who landed up in less-than-tolerant East Central European states that were on the winning side in the Great War were remarkably modest. The lists of grievances that the German government submitted to the League of Nations, which was dominated by the war's victors, were either ignored or only minimally satisfied. Hazony also accepts uncritically Fritz Fischer's view that the German government accepted the necessity of a world war in 1914 in order to achieve total European hegemony. Having studied Fischer's arguments quite thoroughly and having written critically on the subject, I find Hazony's plunge into this subject to be unwise and unwarranted. Unfortunately, this discredited or gravely defective view has been presented by neoconservative journalists in the United States as indisputably true; and so it may have become a fool's errand to point out, as I do in my anthology *Revisions and Dissents*, the staggering superabundance of critical works on Fischer's thesis.