



The European Legacy

Toward New Paradigms

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The Virtue of Nationalism

by Yoram Hazony, New York, Basic Books, 2018, 285 pp., \$30.00 (cloth)

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BOOK REVIEW

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In an age in which words like “populism” and “nation state” have become pejoratives, Yoram Hazony’s defense of nationalism is audacious. The author, an established expert on political philosophy and biblical interpretation, not only succeeds in providing a robust case for nationalism. He also puts on the defensive anti-nationalists who dismiss all appeals to national pride as violent and xenophobic. Additionally, Hazony shows that true conservatism is a political philosophy that preserves national identity while repudiating the contemporary liberalism that is hostile to national sovereignty. This version of liberalism rationalizes a tyrannical order that is justified in the name of “globalization,” “transnationalism,” and other misleading euphemisms (5). In contrast, nationalism is the principled and realistic perspective that “regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions and pursuing their own interests without interference” (3). Hazony never downplays the “many injustices” that nationalists have committed in history (227). True nationalism is not, however, imperialism, “which seeks to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind, as much as possible, under a single political regime” (3).

Hazony is well aware that this perspective swims against a “tidal shift” after World War 2 that altered “attitudes towards expressions of national and religious particularism” (38). This shift amounted to the mistaken perception among many leaders of the victorious Allied nations that nationalism was the cause of both world wars. The understandable revulsion against the Holocaust “succeeded in moving educated elites toward identifying national and religious particularism of any kin with Nazism and racism” (38). As Hazony shows, this reading of history was a colossal blunder, resting on the erroneous assumption that Nazism was a nationalist ideology. In fact, Hitler was a vicious enemy of national sovereignty, leading a regime that sought “to put an end to the principle of the national independence and the self-determination of peoples once and for all” (39). Nevertheless, post-World War 2 anti-nationalist feeling encouraged the rise of “liberal imperialism” which, in practical terms, meant the American domination of much of the world in accord with the legitimate containment of communism. After the Cold War, however, this sentiment reached new and bold heights, culminating in “the effort to establish an American ‘world order,’ with Europe effectively an American protectorate” (50).

This tidal shift was a momentous sea change in other respects. During the Cold War era and its aftermath, America turned its back on its anti-imperialist roots as well as its historic respect for the “national-state tradition” (120), and instead worked to integrate nation-states big and small into what President George H. W. Bush once dubbed “the new world order.” This new American globalism, which enjoyed a great deal of support from European elites, radically deviated from the venerable historical traditions that defended nationalism. According to Hazony, the Hebrew Bible provides “the first sustained presentation” of a polity “based on the independence of a nation living within limited borders alongside other independent nations” (18). Israel consisted of a “number of tribes with a common language or religion, and a past history of acting as a body for the common defense and other large-scale enterprises” (18). He also gives considerable credit to early modern Protestant nations that broke away from

Catholic imperialism and successfully forged traditions that enshrined the principles of “personal freedom and dignity for all,” as well as the “right of national self-determinations” that entails the duty to respect the right of other nations to exist (23–28). Protestantism built on the Hebrew Bible “with its vision of the justice of a world of independent nations” (22). This foundation has also enabled the modern state of Israel to be the one political success story in the Middle East. Hazony, as a patriotic citizen of Israel, is proud of the fact that his nation conducts “itself as the national state of a particular people” while it “has also developed free institutions, which permit its minority national and tribal groups to conduct their religious practices as they see fit, and to educate their children in their own languages and cultural inheritance” (164).

Why does nationalism succeed where other political models fail? Hazony provides an extensive discussion of how nationalism differs from its most significant rivals—*tribalism and despotic states*. The tribe or clan, which is ultimately the outgrowth of the family structure, was the first political order in history that emphasized “the bonds of mutual loyalty that hold firmly in place an alliance of many individuals, each of whom shares in the suffering and triumphs of the others, including those they have never met” (68). Because this “mutual loyalty” is restricted to members of the tribe, it is incompatible with the utopian dreams demanding loyalty to “all human beings” (69). The downside of tribalism is that it can morph into an “anarchic” political order that is “constantly on the verge of warfare,” given the “personal nature of localized rule” that characterizes this society (94). Yet Hazony insists that tribalism is a necessary precondition for nationalism, in light of the fact that the “mutual loyalty of individuals to one another is the most powerful force operative in the political realm” (69). Taking aim at the liberal contractarian principle of individual consent, he avers that a successful nationalism builds on the “strong bonds of mutual loyalty that are characteristic of the family rather than the weak bonds of consent that are of the essence in a business enterprise, that serve as the foundation for a free state” (89).

In contrast to tribalism, Hazony understandably sees nothing beneficial accruing from a despotic state, “whose clans or tribes have not united voluntarily to maintain their freedom, but have, on the contrary been subjugated by a conqueror against their will” (81). This conquest is the opposite of a nationalistic state, in which there is a “free establishment of a government by a coalition of clans or tribes within a given nation” (81). Liberal readers will be shocked by Hazony’s contention that their belief system is a despotic “universal ideology” that seeks to eliminate the “intense desire to protect and strengthen the collective” (74). Ironically, this liberal imperialism that stresses “global” values in fact often conceals the hegemonic agenda of a particular state (e.g., Germany within the European Union).

Hazony is generally on solid ground when he faults the tradition of Enlightenment (or rationalist) liberalism, especially the political philosophy of Kant, for dismissing the bonds of national feeling in favor of a “cosmopolitan” embrace of humanity. Of course, there are striking exceptions to the rule here. Although Hazony rightly criticizes Rousseau for defending a “ne-nationalism” that is at odds with historical (especially biblical) preconditions that make nationalism possible in the modern West (52), Rousseau’s *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1782) is almost Burkean in its emphasis on how a free nation should build on its particular history, religion, and culture. Hazony’s praise of the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill as an opponent of “multinational empire” (198) does not square with his contention that liberalism and nationalism always cancel each other out. His condemnation of slavery as a “disgraceful” practice also taps into a moral universalism that springs out of the Enlightenment tradition (149).

Hazony raises important issues that most liberal globalists would prefer to ignore. He doubts that the business model of contract or consent can be a valid basis for citizenship

(83–84, 88). As long as corporations think and act in “contractual” ways that view people as mere consumers and producers rather than as citizens of nation-states, it will be all the more difficult for nationalists to convince big business to care about non-economic loyalties. Most citizens of once proud Protestant nations in the West are generally more preoccupied with shopping on-line than the mutual bonds that Hazony celebrates. As the Canadian Tory philosopher George Grant warned over fifty years ago in his classic *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965), anti-national liberalism and global capitalism are practically made for each other and are not going away anytime soon.

The policy implications of Hazony’s defense of nationalism would require a revolutionary shift in conventional attitudes as well. He insists that there is no “universal right” to create a nation or to emigrate to an already existing one (168, 173). Hazony also opposes a “new borderless earth” that would take down all barriers that preserve a nation from unwanted migration (228). He even occasionally displays some doubts about whether “Muslim communities can be fully integrated” within states such as India or Israel (262). Taken together, these observations suggest that a successful nationalist state has every right to impose restrictions on citizenship based on religion or historical experience. Unsurprisingly, Hazony praises the American Framers for celebrating the sharing of a “common language, laws, religion, and history” that would “prevent conditions of constant warfare among the former colonies” within the fledgling republic (148). Although modern liberals will dismiss these sentiments as exclusivist, Hazony has brilliantly shown that the burden of evidence for the benefits of endless diversity and borderless nations falls squarely on them.

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