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**Robert H. Wiebe: Who We Are: A History of Popular Nationalism** □ □

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## CHAPTER 1

### Thinking about Nationalism

How did educated Westerners come to make enemies of an inspiration that has changed the lives of billions? It was not always so. At the turn of the twentieth century the philosopher William James judged “the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies, according to its own ideals . . . the sacredest thing in this great human world.”<sup>1</sup> Championing just such causes made Woodrow Wilson a global hero. But disillusionment after the First World War turned to revulsion after the Second, and at midcentury Western intellectuals dug in to battle the nationalist spirit.

What took the urgency from their campaign was a widespread belief that once Europe’s colonies were freed nationalism would die of its own accord, and in place of its divisiveness, a new transnational connectedness would have its day. At least in the United States no generation was so thoroughly indoctrinated in universalist values as the one coming of age around midcentury. Scholars and scientists buried the idea of race. Humanities courses taught a

core of eternal values; studies comparing religions declared their underlying agreement. If before the war educated Americans had routinely assumed human differences—the stairsteps from barbarism to civilization in *National Geographic*—after the war they routinely assumed human unity. From the bipartisan statesman Wendell Willkie’s vision of *One World* to the hugely popular photographic exhibit *The Family of Man*, American public life celebrated the essential sameness of the human condition everywhere.

The magic wand most often expected to make nationalism disappear was modernization, a marvelously capacious concept that bundled Western society’s major trends in science and technology, liberty and democracy, production and distribution, organization and education, into a single historical force and set it on a path of inevitable worldwide dominance. Some merged modernization with the triumph of capitalism; some considered it the flowering of the Enlightenment; others dated it from the Renaissance. In all cases, however, modernization was the juggernaut of progress. Whether nationalism represented a phase in modernization or a primitive opposition to it, it would pass. No one could “deny,” Harvard’s Rupert Emerson thought, “that the nation and the nation-state are anachronisms in the atomic age.”<sup>2</sup> Or in the political scientist Alfred Cobban’s version: “Self-determination is [now] an irrelevant conception.”<sup>3</sup> If nationalism resisted, it would become the raccoon on the highway, squared against the truck’s onrushing headlights.

But nationalism refused to go away. As this infuriatingly persistent anomaly, it became a convenient dumping bin for the frustrations that educated Westerners felt in a fractured world. Nothing so thoroughly affronted the universalist values that the champions of human rights and of law and order alike used to measure the health of the world. It accumulated modifiers: atavistic, fanatic, xenophobic, blind, bloody. . . . Nationalists never smiled; nobody smiled at them. The more intense the nationalism, the worse for everybody else. Who ever heard of a caring nationalism?

Democrats and socialists—followers of nationalism’s two great competitors in modern times—explain nationalism to us. Even as they argue fiercely, socialists and democrats show respect for one another, but almost none for nationalism. For one thing, democracy and socialism come with impressive bodies of systematic thought, the stuff that Western intellectuals bite and chew. Nationalism, on the other hand, has inspired no theories worthy of the name. Even more significant, socialism and democracy have impressive universalist dimensions. Both like the panoramic worldview; both hope to inherit the earth. Nationalism, by contrast, is brazenly particular. If a few people long ago made gestures toward an ideal world of nations, contemporary nationalists have no interest in that kind of big picture. They care about the cause at hand. In the end, nationalists themselves have virtually no voice in Western circles. It is as if we read only Iranian scholarship on United States history.

To no surprise, then, Western intellectuals seldom have anything favorable to say about nationalism. First of all, they tell us, it is flimsy. Leaders invent it and followers imagine it. In one of history’s truly monumental tricks, according to this line of reasoning, millions upon millions spread over continents and centuries have denied what was really happening to them in order to chase after fantasies.

Moreover, these millions have been as desperate as they have been deluded. Nationalism feasts on damaged psyches. According to Karl Popper, the high priest of philosophical rationalism, “Nationalism appeals to our tribal instincts, to passion and to prejudice, and to our nostalgic desire to be relieved from the strain of individual responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> *Escape from Freedom*, in Erich Fromm’s haunting phrase. Nationalism, declares Tom Nairn, an expert on its role in the United Kingdom, is “the pathology of modern developmental history” with a “built-in capacity for descent into dementia.”<sup>5</sup> Desperate people are dangerous people, easy prey to the peddlers of modern society’s most vicious nostrums. For

George Mosse, a specialist on Nazi Germany, racism is nothing more than “a heightened nationalism”; in the same spirit, the journalist Michael Ignatieff equates “European racism” with something he calls “white ethnic nationalism.”<sup>6</sup>

Above all, nationalism is the voodoo doll that absorbs the sins of the world’s states—that is, those sovereignties dividing up most of the earth’s land and purporting to govern its people, bounded unit by bounded unit. Thanks to a general confusion of nation with state, we usually treat the omnipresent state and *nation-state* as interchangeable terms and with that sleight of hand make nationalism available to take the blame for sundry state actions. Proponents of democracy and socialism bridle at distorted uses of their own value systems: hollow constitutions and rigged elections posing as democracy, secret police and dictatorial rule posing as socialism. When it comes to the uses of nationalism, however, anything goes. Law-abiding states seek peace and order; nationalist ones wreak havoc. Good states further the general welfare; nationalist ones persecute minorities and squander resources. The more of a bad thing we find in a state, the more nationalist we say it is.

Indeed, nationalism subverts sound states like Canada and Belgium, then proliferates rickety ones that crowd each other like shacks in a slum. Balkanization is our byword for what nationalism has wrought. With the Balkans themselves in mind Misha Glenny writes in the *New Yorker*: “[too many people are scrambling to establish nation-states on too small a patch of land.”<sup>7</sup> The situation in Africa and Asia is even worse. “In the third world,” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a bellwether of liberalism, declares, “nationalism, having overthrown Western colonialism, launches a horde of new states, large and micro, often at each other’s throats.”<sup>8</sup> It’s a jungle out there.

Most damning of all, nationalism takes the blame for the state’s militarism. Advocates of democracy and socialism recognize that something in their own value systems—democracy’s or social-

ism's better self, as it were—pulls against state aggression; but nationalism, with scarcely an advocate, seems to have no better self: It *is* state aggression. “I make no secret of my belief that nationalism”—its lifelong student Boyd Shafer has concluded—“. . . leads to war and destruction.”<sup>9</sup> More succinctly, the scholar Mark Beissinger writes: “In an age of mass politics all interstate wars are nationalist wars.”<sup>10</sup>

By demonizing nationalism we avoid reckoning with it. Let's step back and start over. *Nationalism is the desire among people who believe they share a common ancestry and a common destiny to live under their own government on land sacred to their history.* Nationalism expresses an aspiration with a political objective. Behind that aspiration lies a sense of kinship that is simultaneously fictional and real—that is, culturally created, as all kin systems are, yet based in some measure on an overlapping of customs, histories, and genealogies. In each of the three primary contexts for nationalist movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—people in migration, people in fear of cultural disintegration, and people in search of freedom—kinship holds out the prospect of a closer connection, a deeper trust, a surer protection than alternative ties seem capable of providing.

There is nothing inherently violent in a movement based on kinship. The people in one house are no more a family if they blow up the house next door. It is simply absurd to blame nationalism indiscriminately for the terrorism and thuggery let loose in the modern world, as if it were responsible for—say—China's Cultural Revolution or Argentina's military brutality. Nationalism is no more militaristic than Frederick the Great was nationalistic.

The scope of a nationalist movement is determined by the people who join it, wherever they may be. Its sacred land, as much a beacon as a location, may or may not have fixed boundaries. Nationalism gives people a way of thinking about a place. In the

literal, not the invidious sense, it is Janus-faced, always looking both backward and forward. Anatole France encapsulated it nicely: “A nation is a communion of memories and hopes.” Partisan nationalists are no more selective about what they remember than professional historians, even if they use quite different criteria. Nor are they more dreamily optimistic about the future than enthusiasts for democracy or socialism. In the philosopher Anthony Birch’s useful distinction, “People are not conservative nationalists or liberal nationalists; they are nationalists who may happen also to be either conservatives or liberals.”<sup>11</sup>

In a tough environment of competing loyalties—religious, civic, and occupational among others—nationalism has been strikingly versatile. Sometimes the nation acquires the attributes of an organic being that “can be said to have a soul, spirit, and personality.”<sup>12</sup> In crisis, it can be transmuted into an immortal force, the phoenix that rises from defeat over and over to fight again. In fact, disaster may be construed as an essential preliminary to the ultimate triumph. Where a people’s primary need is to find a source of integration, nationalism can provide it; where their primary need is to draw a line of separation, nationalism can do that, too. Change, change, change: Belying nationalism’s own dogmatism, permeability and adaptability rank among its greatest strengths.

Appropriately, nationalism’s relations with the state have been shifting and elusive. States, hovering like crows over the nests that nationalists make, have also played on the sentiments of ancestry, destiny, and sacred soil. Try though they might, however, they have rarely inspired feelings of kin-connectedness, the core around which cultures of nationalism have developed. If the forefathers in the Gettysburg Address are the forefathers of its readers, it may rouse nationalist sentiments among them; but if thoughts of forefathers send people’s minds to the four winds, nationalism will follow after them, no matter how dedicated and obedient citizens of the United States they may be.

The more common state role is its attempt to swallow kin-based

groups inside a civic whole. Aggressive states, seeking to stamp their values on a dissident population, trigger the nationalism of cultural survival. Contrary to common wisdom, nationalism does not shape militarism; militarism shapes nationalism. The weaponry of the modern state, spread promiscuously, has influenced cultural clashes much as it has domestic conflicts: With guns, people shoot. Much of what passes for nationalism's intractability is better understood as a defense in the face of the state's capacity to kill. Almost all the great massacres of modern times have been state inspired, state directed, or at least state supported. States, not nations, generate the miserable millions of stateless people.

Curiously, the state is most deadly to nationalism when nationalism triumphs. If a nationalist movement succeeds in forming a state, it almost always dissolves in the process. As the anthropologist Richard Handler has explained it, the nationalist vision is incompatible with the exercise of state power. By its nature, the day-to-day affairs of organized government shatter nationalism's promise of a harmonious whole: Bureaucracy trumps unity. Phrased another way, an institutionalized nationalist movement is a contradiction in terms. Where "[c]ompeting groups all proclaim their paramount concern with the 'national interest' . . . nationalism as a specific form of politics becomes meaningless," writes the historian John Breuilly. "Nationalism remains distinctive only for so long as it is unsuccessful."<sup>13</sup> If nations were the organic beings their champions sometimes claim, we might call this the larva's paradox. But that image misses nationalism's blindly aspiring nature: how its very ambition obscures the deadliness of the goal. Instead we will call this the Icarus Effect.

In the end, nationalism and the state have innumerable overlaps and fundamental differences. States, for example, often seek to expand their domains, but nationalism, coveting a homogeneous community, stands at odds with imperialism. Hannah Arendt, no friend of nationalism, considered the nation "least suited for unlimited growth because the genuine consent at its base cannot be



stretched indefinitely.”<sup>14</sup> As Alfred Cobban noted, the more that minorities within a multiethnic state support its imperialist ambitions, the weaker their drives for self-determination tend to be. It is no surprise, therefore, that under scrutiny the vaunted nation-state practically vanishes. One estimate counts “1,500 nations, 150 states, and 15 nation states.”<sup>15</sup> Walker Connor, a leading scholar in this field, considers 12 of the 132 two states that he has examined to be full-fledged nation-states. Another respected scholar, Will Kymlicka, qualifies only 3 out of 184. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott has dismissed the entire crop: “No European state (let alone an imitation European state elsewhere in the world) has ever come within measurable distance of being a ‘nation state.’”<sup>16</sup>

Once we disengage nationalism from the crimes of the state, the rest of the charge against it looks quite provincial. We like our own commitments and priorities, our own myths and modes of violence, and we hunker down in defense of what the geopolitician Samuel Huntington calls our civilization. When dissidents in the hills of Sierra Leone hack off the hands and feet of hapless passersby, it is the work of African savages; when American land mines blow far more limbs to kingdom come, it is an unavoidable consequence of military necessity. No punishment is too severe for guerrilla fighters who bomb civilian sites. But what of pilots who bomb civilian refugees? The government says it is sorry. Big power, big price. Not many Americans volunteer to die for the sins of their president. Yet not many complain when United States policy forces hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians to die—or at least suffer mightily—for Saddam Hussein’s.

By cool Western standards nationalists care too much, and they care about the wrong things. Ethnic pride may pass, but ethnic passion definitely not. Nationalism in action is just another form of holy war, the social theorist Benjamin Barber tells us. Among competing loyalties in modern times, nationalism is as likely as any other to provide an integrated framework for everyday life. To sophisticated members of the wealthiest societies in the history of

the world, people who wear many hats in their many lives at work, at home, and at play, the prospect of any integrating framework sounds suffocating. We seem incapable of recognizing social and psychological creativity in a reconceived sense of kinship.

Our universalism is another form of provincialism. Even the most widely cited declarations of human rights originate somewhere, not everywhere. American universalism, to no surprise, highlights American values—constitutionalism, a merit system, religious pluralism, a consumer culture's standard of living, and the like—which its advocates then declare absolute and timeless. There seems to be no room for an alternative measure of right and wrong, one, for example, from the perspective of a Peruvian peasant or a Sudanese herdsman who might judge Americans, squandering incredible quantities of natural resources at irreversible cost to the environment, the globe's greatest violators of human rights.

Indulging the strange conceit that we are smarter than the rest of the earth's population, Western intellectuals reserve the right to decide what is best for them. The logic of modernization presses the case for bigger, faster, richer, smoother. A strong pull toward smaller units, however popular, seems perverse. On the eve of Czechoslovakia's dissolution, America's cosmopolitan press predicted the rapid impoverishment of those purblind, seceding Slovaks. In fact, both Czechs and Slovaks have profited. Even educated Westerners, who are sure that the world's ethnic hostilities flare only because unscrupulous leaders manipulate impressionable masses, routinely flunk the factual tests. Now let me see, did Serbs massacre Croats during the Second World War, or was it vice versa? Why would Hutu hack the bodies of all those Tutsi who never did anything to them? Answers that elude us are chiseled in other people's collective memories.

What a world universalized according to Western standards might look like is by no means clear. No leader in the West advocates a world without boundaries where people come and go, live and work, erect governments and institute law as they choose.

Contrary to the social philosopher Liah Greenfeld's assertions—"[a] nation coextensive with humanity is in no way a contradiction in terms"<sup>17</sup>—the universal nation is in every way a contradiction in terms.<sup>17</sup> Even as an imagining, the sociologist Anthony Smith reminds us, a "global culture answers no living needs."<sup>18</sup> In its vastness it offers us no way of situating or identifying ourselves.

We need a fresh start. Let's begin with three propositions. First, the world has been, is now, and will be into the foreseeable future crosshatched with divisions. Second, nationalism has been one, but only one of the modern world's major divisions. Others include language, religion, and race, each of which has sometimes been allied with nationalism and sometimes been at odds with it. Third, with one of these related divisions, the state, nationalism has repeatedly made a Faustian bargain, trading its soul for its own fulfillment as a state.

On these terms, comfortable Westerners have excellent reasons to dislike nationalism. It is disruptive. It has no affinity for democracy: National self-determination specifies an outcome, not the process that gets people there. It shows scant tolerance for self-conscious minorities in its midst. "In the logic of nationalism, a nation cannot contain within itself another nation."<sup>19</sup> In power, nationalists threaten to initiate an Onion Effect. Peeling off the authority that has been oppressing one ethnic group may free it to oppress other ethnic groups, who in turn try to peel off the layer constricting them, and so on. In Sri Lanka, Tamil, who comprise 20 percent of the population, seek a state of their own, Eelam, which if it came into being would contain minorities constituting 20 percent of Eelam's population.

But we cannot understand nationalism, let alone judge it, if we measure it against our universalist standards. Nationalism is just one of many divisions that stand impervious to that deeply flawed Western concept. Better we set it against alternative divisions. Would we prefer separations dictated by race? or by religion?

With these cautions in mind, let us proceed to the history of

nationalism, which thrusts three questions to the forefront. First, *where* does nationalism appear? As its cultural contexts changed, so did nationalism. Although this variable should alert us in particular to the dramatic differences between nationalism's Western varieties and its many guises elsewhere in the world, geography was not destiny. Western-style nationalism and the state associated with it had an easier passage into Japan than into Bulgaria. Second, *when* does nationalism arrive? Copying from one another, nationalists developed movements that had specific times stamped all over them. By the same token, the particular range of problems and possibilities that roughly common circumstances set before an array of nationalist movements—the centralization of European state power around the turn of the twentieth century, for example, or the anticolonial prospects around midcentury or the proliferation of deadly weapons late in the century—fixed them just as firmly in time. Third, *why* nationalism? What has given nationalism its powerful appeal for some people sometimes?

Nationalism, which looks like a major problem to us, arrived during the nineteenth century as the solution to an even more fundamental problem: How could people sort themselves in societies where the traditional ways no longer worked? Rather than a gigantic fraud perpetrated time and again on the mindless masses, nationalism thrived because it addressed basic human needs. Examining the nature of those needs in nationalism's original home, Europe, is the first step in our inquiry.