

Clarity About Nationalism

In order to make arguments for nationalism, we have to define it.

The first definition in Merriam-Webster is “loyalty and devotion to a nation.” But in a second paragraph, it adds, “especially: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.”

Let’s be clear: If the second paragraph is the only definition of nationalism, nationalism is always a bad thing. Furthermore, I acknowledge that this definition is what some people have in mind when they call themselves nationalists.

At the same time, even anti-nationalists would have to acknowledge that if the first paragraph is the definition of “nationalism,” nationalism can often be a beautiful thing.

So, if we are to be honest, the answer to the question of whether nationalism is good or bad is “How do you define it?”

Dictionary.com offers seven definitions.

The first is “spirit or aspirations common to the whole nation.”

The second is “devotion and loyalty to one’s own country; patriotism.”

Only when we get to the third definition is the definition pejorative: “excessive patriotism; chauvinism.”

Therefore, a) based on the competing definitions of the term, b) assuming both definitions can be true and c) if intellectual honesty is to govern our discussion, we can reach only one conclusion: There is good nationalism and bad

nationalism.

That – not “nationalism is always good” or “nationalism is always bad” – is the only accurate assessment.

Therefore, morally speaking, nationalism is no different from anything else in life.

There is moral violence (in self-defense, in defense of innocents, in defense of a society under unjust attack, etc.) and immoral violence (murder of innocents, wars of aggression, etc.).

There is moral sex (consensual sex between adults and, in the Judeo-Christian value system, within marriage) and immoral sex (such as rape, incest and with a child).

There is moral use of a gun (in self-defense, etc.) and immoral use of a gun (against an innocent, etc.).

Knives are used morally by chefs and surgeons and immorally by murderers, muggers and torturers.

Even love must be morally assessed according to context. Love is not always beautiful and moral. Germans' love of Hitler, Chinese people's love of Mao and Russians' love of Stalin were evil.

Nationalism is beautiful when it involves commitment to an essentially decent nation and when it welcomes other people's commitment to their nations. Nationalism is evil when it is used to celebrate an evil regime, when it celebrates a nation as inherently superior to all others and when it denigrates all other national commitments.

One should add that nationalism is evil when it celebrates race, but that is not nationalism; it is racism. Nationalism and racism may be conjoined, as German Nazism did. But they are not definitionally related. While some Americans have conjoined American nationalism with race (such as the

Confederacy, the Ku Klux Klan and currently various fringe “white identity” movements), American nationalism, based as it is on the motto “e pluribus unum” (“out of many, one”), by definition includes Americans of all races and ethnicities. That is how conservatives define American nationalism. I have never met a conservative who defined American national identity as definitionally “white.”

Otherwise, nationalism – the celebration of one’s nation and one’s national identity – is almost always a beautiful thing.

The creation of nations was a major moral achievement. It got people to identify with something beyond their families and tribes, which always involved violent feuds and warfare. The creation of the nation is one of the main reasons the West developed morally and in many other ways ahead of other cultures.

And the lack of a unifying national identity is one of the two main reasons (the other being corruption) that much of Africa lags behind other regions. If Hutus and Tutsis would have identified first as Rwandans, one of the worst genocides in the contemporary world – the Hutu slaughter of nearly 1 million Tutsis in a little over three months in 1994 – would likely never have happened. It was murder at a greater pace than the Nazi genocide of the Jews in the Holocaust – and without any modern machines of death. It was done one-on-one almost entirely using machetes.

Today, nationalism in Europe is increasing primarily because of the belief among many Europeans that the European Union is overbearing and because many Europeans do not believe that a “European” identity can offer anywhere near the comfort, emotional sustenance and communal ties a national identity offers.

Human beings need a descending order of commitments: first to oneself, then to one’s family, then to one’s community, then

to one's nation and then to humanity. It is neither possible nor praiseworthy to cry over a family killed in a car crash on the other side of the world as one would cry over the death of one's own family or a family in one's neighborhood or in one's own country.

The great teaching of the Bible is "Love your neighbor as yourself." It does not say "Love all of humanity as yourself." Love must begin with our neighbor. It should never end with our neighbor, but it must begin with him.

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Last Updated: Monday, Jun 24, 2019 20:14:22 -0700