

**INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY**

**AFTER THE NATION?**

**Critical Reflections on Nationalism  
and Postnationalism**

**EDITED BY KEITH BREEN AND SHANE O'NEILL**

# After the Nation?

## Critical Reflections on Nationalism and Postnationalism

Edited by

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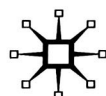
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# Introduction: A Postnationalist Era?

*Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill*

This volume explores the various ways in which the nation-state as an organizational structure and nationalism as a motivating ideology are challenged by contemporary political realities, and how these challenges can be met. Nationalism has, of course, been a dominant political ideal for a very long time now. The received and still prevalent conceptualization of this ideal is that the state and the nation should cohere within a single, sovereign territory and that the nation-state thereby constituted should express, and ensure the continued expression of, a determinate national culture or identity. There have been many defenders of this ideal. For Mill (1861), for example, nationalism conceived in this manner was a basic condition of representative government, since only nationalism could ensure the development of the 'fellow-feeling' or unifying culture necessary for the functioning of such government. Many have also argued that nationalism is a requirement of modern industrial societies, since the common, homogeneous culture it helped generate proved decisive in the rise of an educated workforce essential for technological advancement, economic growth, prosperity, and progress generally (Gellner, 1983). For others, nationalism represents not only a functional response to the upheavals heralded by modernity, but also a profound source of meaning for people in the modern age, national culture granting them a feeling of rootedness, a nourishing link to a rich past, and a sense of community (Hutchinson, 1987; Smith, 1986). And nationalism has often been thought to be the foundation of freedom and democracy, since it was by way of the nation that the *demos*, 'the people', was historically constituted (Greenfeld, 1992; Schnapper, 1998). In this guise, the nation-state proved a resource for nineteenth-century resistance to imperial domination, as embodied in the figures of Mazzini or Parnell, and twentieth-century struggles against colonialism (Fanon, 1961).

But alongside these arguments there are many equally familiar anti-nationalist claims. Against the nationalism of Mill, Acton (1862) saw in nationalist movements and the nation-state model not the guarantor of judicious representative government but a harbinger of bureaucratic centralization and of the coercive effacement of communal difference and autonomy. Reflecting Acton's view, Kedourie (1960) famously chastised nationalist projects for embodying a millenarian and immoderate politics which repeatedly concluded in irrationalism, intolerant tribalism, and violence. For others, the origins of the nation-state and nationalism lie less in the functional demands of an emergent modern economy than in the imperatives of a European, and now international, military system (Tilly, 1975). Nationalism was and is, therefore, not so much a requirement for social prosperity and progress but a key factor in modern mass warfare and a bulwark of militarism. There are those, too, who question nationalism's democratic credentials. Far from being expressive of the democratic spirit, nationalism is a movement driven by elites who seek to mould and manipulate the masses in order to gain and retain power (Brass, 1991). Although many of these arguments are pitched as historical explanations, rather than ethical analyses, of nationalism, viewed normatively their import is quite clear: it is a dangerous doctrine and a frequently malignant political force.

In recent years, the debate has taken a somewhat different turn. While critiques of nationalism for its irrationality or militarism are still expressed, especially as regards 'ethnonationalism', the focus of concern has been less the origins or character of nationalism and more whether it is currently *viable*, whether, in short, the nation-state remains the primary unit of political concern or is instead being eclipsed and rendered increasingly marginal by contemporary events. In line with this shift, since the 1990s there has been a growing number of authors who contend that we are now in a 'postnational' or 'postnationalist' age (for example, Archibugi and Held, 1995; Habermas, 2001; Held, 1995; Sassen, 2003; Soysal, 1994; Tambini, 2001). Drawing from a number of disciplines – sociology, comparative political science, international political economy, and political theory – they argue on the basis of empirical, theoretical, and normative reflections that the high point of the nation-state is over and that the time has come to celebrate the rise of new socio-political formations and possibilities.

There is a need for conceptual clarity here, since 'postnational' and 'postnationalist' have importantly different potential meanings (Geoghegan, 1994). The term 'postnational' may be taken to suggest that the nation-state and national identities no longer matter, that they

have no political significance. This is a very strong view to which few subscribe. By contrast, the term 'postnationalist', which best captures the nature of the debate, does not imply a denial of national identity or its endurance. Rather, the suggestion is that the nation-state and the forms of nationalism that underpinned it, while they have not been dissolved, are being empirically and normatively *superseded*. This claim of supersession rests on two key arguments which typify the postnationalist perspective: that the nation-state is being relegated as an effective political institution by processes of globalization, and that national identity is being outstripped and displaced by the rise of alternative forms of identity.

The argument from globalization rests on three observations. The first is that global capitalism, via the mechanisms of financial and commodity markets and institutions such as multinational corporations, shows little regard for either national borders or the prerogatives of national governments. The result is that accelerated capital flows and increased locational competition make it ever more difficult for nation-states to control their own economies or maintain their welfare systems. With this there is, second, the appearance of threats whose scope the nation-state is incapable of dealing with and which therefore transform nation-states from discrete units into 'overlapping communities of fate' (Held, 1995, p. 136). These include environmental degradation, climate change, population growth, disease, and global terror networks. The third is the rise of transnational institutions, including the World Bank and the IMF, and regional blocs, such as the European Union and NAFTA, which increasingly circumscribe the nation-state's room for manoeuvre. The consequence of all three is that 'the areas in which a state's political community can make decisions autonomously are decreasing' (Archibugi, 2004, p. 443; see also Linklater, 1998).

The erosion of national economic and political sovereignty is also accompanied, so the claim goes, by diminutions in national identity. This is on account of an increasing pluralization of identity and affiliation from *within*, through the assertion of minority national and ethnic affiliations, and *without*, that is, through immigration and the diversification of populations. These arguments are made in different ways and towards different ends by cosmopolitans (Habermas, 2001; Waldron, 1992) and by multiculturalists (Parekh, 2000, 2008). The implication in each case is that the traditional identification of the state with a specific national identity can no longer be sustained practically or defended morally. Associated with this is the contention that nationalism, insofar as it presumes an identity of nation and state, is incapable of addressing

the oftentimes brutal conflicts that arise in territories where there are two or more mobilized and antagonistic nationalities. Indeed, it is nationalist ideals and goals which initiate many of these conflicts in the first instance and exacerbate them thereafter (Glenny, 1996, p. 32; McCabe, 1997).

The upshot of these arguments is that national politics and citizenship lack the relevance they once had. Some even now maintain that national citizenship has given way to local, regional, and transnational forms of citizenship based upon non-national institutions and universal human rights frameworks (Jacobson, 1997). Here the EU is deemed a portent for things to come, European citizenship being seen as embodying 'postnational citizenship in its most elaborate form' (Soysal, 1994, p. 148; see also Bosniak, 2006; Sassen, 2002). Together these reflections provide the impetus for wide-ranging moral-ethical critiques of nationalist politics centred on the ideals of democracy and distributive justice. With regard to democracy, if it is the case that the nation-state is haemorrhaging sovereignty and national ties are waning, then the only defensible form of democratic rule is one which institutionalizes decision-making procedures *across* national boundaries. As Held (1995, p. 235) puts it, 'democracy within a particular community and democratic relations among communities are interlocked, absolutely inseparable' and therefore 'new organizational and binding mechanisms must be created if democracy is to develop' in the future. With respect to theories of justice, such thinking finds expression in thoroughgoing rejections of the particularism of national commitments and attachments. If, as argued by many liberal egalitarians, the individual is primary, and if, as well, the major challenges to individual well-being – poverty, environmental degradation, and exploitation – are transnational in origin and nature, then what is required is a universal, global theory of redistributive justice that makes no significant distinction between co-nationals and foreigners (Beitz, 1999; Caney, 2005; Pogge, 2002). From this cosmopolitan perspective one's nationality is arbitrary and thus irrelevant from the normative point of view, since 'it is [only] the person and the general duty we have toward him that matters morally' (Goodin, 1988, p. 686).

If these criticisms ring true, nationalism would appear to have little current purchase. However, there are strong grounds for scepticism. While it is true that there has been an intensification and deepening of global networks, this need not entail a supersession of the nation-state, indeed quite the reverse. As regards capitalism, critics of post-nationalism observe that historically the rise of the nation-state and



of transnational capital have gone hand in hand, that the two stand in a symbiotic or 'complementary', rather than opposed, relationship (Holton, 1998, p. 7). This is not only because transnational capitalism is itself largely the product of powerful Western nation-states, but also because capitalism as an economic system requires for its smooth functioning the existence of stable, culturally unified societies (Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Mann, 1993, 1997). In relation to the amelioration of global crises, the societies that have been most successful in this regard – think of the AIDS epidemic – are those with strong and long-established nation-state structures, not least because these states have been able to harness intergovernmental institutions to their own interests. And while the existence of regional blocs does impact upon the sovereignty of their constituent member states, the EU, the most developed regional bloc to date, nonetheless 'remains an association between nation-states, an inter-national network of interaction' (Mann, 1997, p. 486, our emphasis).

Doubts are also expressed as to the waning of national identity. Here critics often point to the distinctive status and class characteristics of postnationalists, who as members of transnational, mobile academic elites are predisposed to think of themselves and of the world generally in non-national terms (Hansen, 2009, p. 20; Joppke, 1998, p. 26). The experience of the majority of citizens is likely to be very different, however, as the endurance of strong national affiliations in Europe and elsewhere among the middle and lower economic classes shows (Fligstein, 2008). As to the pluralization of identity, while this certainly undermines exclusivist notions of nationhood, it need not be at the expense of national identity *per se*. Indeed, it is notable that many of those who stress plural group identities, with the exception of strong cosmopolitans, stop short of rejecting national identity, the nation-state, or even nationalism, properly conceived. Instead, they typically call for the internal transformation of nation-states and a reconceptualization of nationalism along lines that are more inclusive and hospitable to cultural difference (for instance, Parekh, 2000, pp. 230–6). Postnationalism consequently errs in neglecting the truth that 'there are genuinely liberal forms of both state nationalism and minority nationalism' (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 10). The existence of violent ethnonational conflict may also be understood as providing little reason for endorsing postnationalism either as a diagnosis of the present or as a political programme. The resurgence of ethnonational conflicts in the post-Cold War period, while lamentable, is in fact testimony to the enduring appeal of nationalism as a living ideology. Under this