

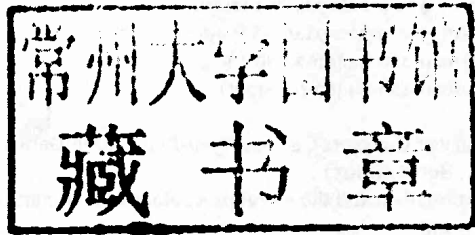


Nationalism and  
the Moral Psychology of  
Community



BERNARD YACK

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## Preface

General studies of nationalism usually take one of two forms: the short, sharp theoretical essay and the long, exhaustive comparative study. This book, I am afraid, falls somewhere between the two. It is a rather long—though I hope not exhausting—theoretical study of the subject.

As such, the book is relatively unusual. We political theorists have finally begun to pay serious attention to nationalism. But we still rarely devote anything like the sustained analysis to the subject that we devote to other key concepts, such as liberty or justice or the state. Perhaps that is because with nationalism we have few canonical examples to follow. No Marx, no Mill, no Machiavelli. Only minor texts by first-rate thinkers, like Fichte, or major texts by second-rate thinkers, like Mazzini. Or perhaps it is because the success of nationalism has proved such an embarrassment for virtually every major modern school of political thought, from liberalism and Marxism to conservatism and communitarianism. The fact that fascism is the only major modern political ideology that seems unembarrassed by its association with nationalism does not exactly enhance its attractiveness. Whatever the reason, the short, pointed essay—most often directed at our colleagues' delusions about the subject—seems to be the form in which social and political theorists feel most comfortable dealing with nationalism.

That is the kind of book I set out to write as well. I was astonished by the way in which moral and political philosophers in the 1980s seemed to be ignoring the importance of nationalism, even as they threw themselves into a series of intense debates about the role of community in modern society. As a Canadian living and teaching in the United States in the 1980s, I found it very difficult to connect these debates to my ex-

perience of everyday life in this country. How could anyone think of the individuals chanting “U.S.A., U.S.A.” at the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984 as “unencumbered selves,” to use the expression Michael Sandel made popular? (The Russians and East Germans boycotted the games that year, so American spectators got to celebrate their “encumbrances” even more than they usually do on such occasions.) How could social and political theorists talk so much about whether or not American individualists could live without community and yet show no interest in Americans’ intense and noisy attachment to their nation?

I tried to answer these questions in a pair of essays, “Does Liberal Practice ‘Live Down’ to Liberal Theory?” and “The Myth of the Civic Nation.” But having explained why many of my colleagues were ignoring the national elephant in the room, I still found it difficult to say what it was doing there or even to give a coherent account of its characteristics as a species. I had, it seems, cleared a construction site rather than an unobstructed view of a previously hidden subject. Rather than return to more familiar and less daunting subjects, I decided to get to work on that site and write the book you have before you.

The key claim of this book—and the primary reason for its length—is that it is the inadequacy of our understanding of the phenomenon of community that has made it so difficult to explain and evaluate our reliance on national loyalties. In other words, it is our misunderstanding of the genus, community, that has created so much confusion and uncertainty in the study of its surprisingly powerful species, the nation. In order to correct this misunderstanding, the book proposes an alternative theory of community, one that develops a broader and more flexible understanding of the moral psychology that animates this form of human association. (“Moral psychology” here and throughout the book refers to the ways in which we imagine others as objects of our concern and obligation. As such, it is an essential, if often underappreciated, phenomenon for political theorists like myself.) The book argues that we need to replace models of community shaped by images of solidarity or collective identity with a model shaped by the relations of mutual concern and loyalty characteristic of what I call “social friendship.” It then shows how this alternative understanding of community can help us make better sense of nations and nationalism and the problems that they create for us.

I suspect that many students of nationalism, tired as they are of the seemingly endless and circular attempts to define the nation, may think

that the last thing we need is a step back to an even higher level of abstraction. But I hope to show that it is precisely our failure to take this step and rework our understanding of community that has made our efforts to make sense of nations and nationalism so frustrating. Theoretical studies of nationalism have so far shown little of what Hegel liked to call “the patience of the concept.” I hope that this study will prove that such patience will be rewarded.

## Acknowledgments

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I have benefited tremendously from the responses I have received over the years to my ideas about nationalism—much more, I suspect, than I can remember. I would, however, like to take the opportunity to thank a few individuals whose comments were particularly important to the development of my book: Jens Bartelson, Sam Beer, Ron Beiner, Margaret Canovan, Ingrid Creppell, John Hall, Stephen Holmes, John Hutchinson, Margaret Moore, Gary Shiffman, Rogers Smith, and Kamila Stullerova. My greatest debt, as ever, is to Marion Smiley, my co-conspirator in life. I could never have begun—let alone completed—this book if her insight and generosity had not lit the way.



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Portions of this book have appeared in earlier forms, though all have been extensively revised for their publication here. Chapter 1 first appeared as “The Myth of the Civic Nation,” *Critical Review* 10 (Spring 1996): 193–212, and then in a revised form in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Nationalism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 103–18. Portions of chapter 6 first appeared as “Popular Sovereignty and Nationalism,” *Political Theory* 29 (4): 517–36. © 2001 Sage Publications. One section of chapter 8 draws on material that appeared in “Birthright, Birthwrongs: Contingency, Choice and Community in Recent Political Thought,” *Political Theory* 39 (3): 406–16. © 2011 Sage Publications. And some sections of chapter 9 first appeared as “You Don’t Have to Be a Fanatic to Act Like One,” *Studi Veneziani* 59 (2010): 27–43.

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# Introduction

## Nationhood and Community

The rise of nationalism is one of modern history's greatest surprises. Our classic theories of modern society have taught us to associate modern times with the weakening of inherited loyalties, with a shift from intergenerational communities to voluntary associations of individuals. But the near universal spread of nationalism tells a different story. For it suggests that at least one form of intergenerational community has not just survived, but flourished in the modern world. The nation, it seems, has shared the individual's rise to prominence in modern political life.

When historical developments surprise us in this way, it usually means that there is something wrong with either our assumptions about what should have happened or our interpretations of what actually did happen. With regard to the triumph of nationalism, most scholars seem to have concluded that it is our interpretations of events that need correction. For they have worked very hard at developing accounts of nationalism that bring the phenomenon back into line with the conceptual dichotomies—*gemeinschaft* versus *gesellschaft*, tradition versus modernity—that ground our most influential theories of modern society and development. Some argue that despite its bad manners and country dress nationalism is really quite at home, even indispensable, in the modern world of contract and commerce. Others teach us that nationalism is an intruder from the premodern world of blood and soil, an outburst of the primitive passions that modern society has tried so hard to repress. Still others contend that nationalism appears in both forms, as a liberal devotion to shared political principles in “civic” nations and as an illiberal passion for ancestor worship in their “ethnic” counterparts.

But if nations and nationalism have become so commonplace in the modern world, then perhaps it is our theoretical assumptions about intergenerational community that cry out for revision, rather than our interpretations of nations and nationalism. If national community plays so large a role in modern societies, then perhaps we were wrong to identify modern life so completely with a shift from the contingencies of intergenerational loyalty to the purposiveness of individual choice and contract. If large and impersonal national forms of community appear in traditional societies, then perhaps we were wrong to identify the pre-modern world so strongly with kin- and village-centered communities. The nation, with its passionate appeals to inherited loyalties, certainly looks like an anomaly in the modern world when it is viewed through the lens of our most influential theories of history and social development. But if it has nevertheless risen to unprecedented political importance in that world, then perhaps it is time to have our eyes checked and get some new glasses.

This book grinds the lenses for these glasses and shows how to use them in the study of nations and nationalism. It proposes a broader and more flexible theory of community, one that treats community as a generic component of human association, rather than as a special product of traditional family and village life. And it then shows how this theory can help us solve old puzzles and generate new insights into the role of nations and nationalism in modern political life. Part 1 addresses explanatory issues, such as how to understand nations and nationalism as social phenomena and how to account for their unexpected rise to political prominence. Part 2 addresses normative and practical issues, focusing, in particular, on what I call the moral problem with nationalism. Both parts, however, try to show that we can dispel much of the confusion surrounding the study of nationalism once we free our understanding of community from the grip of the dichotomies that shape our most influential social theories.

Benedict Anderson's account of nations as "imagined communities" takes an important step toward this goal.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I suspect that this famous argument owes much of its influence to the way in which it loosens the conceptual straitjacket that modern social theories have placed on thinking about national community. The concept of imagined communities helps us cross the divide that separates *gemeinschaft* from *gesell-*

1. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5-7.

schaft and begin to think more creatively about the forms of community that bind large and relatively impersonal groups like the nation.

Nevertheless, Anderson's concept provides us with only a first step in the right direction. For the triumph of nationalism in the modern world challenges us to rethink our understanding of communal membership itself, not just our understanding of how far such membership can be extended. In particular, it challenges us to improve our understanding of the moral psychology of community, by which I mean the way in which we imagine ourselves connected to the concerns of people with whom we share things. If community plays such a powerful role in large, impersonal forms of association like the nation, then it cannot be defined in terms of familiarity, kinship, frequent interaction, or any of the other factors that unite the small face-to-face forms of association with which it is usually identified. Anderson's concept of imagined community helps us account for the strong connections we feel to people with whom we never interact. But in doing so it raises new questions about what it means to be connected to others in a distinctly communal way.<sup>2</sup>

In *gemeinschaft* models, it is the subordination of individuals to the group that makes a community. Communities connect us by submerging our differences in a collective will or identity and are contrasted with forms of association that we construct to serve our interests as discrete individuals.<sup>3</sup> Nations, from this point of view, must fall into one category or the other. They must either subordinate individuals or be subordinated to individual needs and interests, hence the familiar contrast between so-called primordialist and instrumentalist (or modernist) theories of nationalism that shapes so much scholarly analysis of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

2. Craig Calhoun (*Nations Matter*, 110) also notes the incongruity of the invocation of the specific conception of community, rooted as it is in the study of face-to-face associations, to make sense of the impersonal forms of belonging promoted by national and cosmopolitan forms of association.

3. Tönnies (*Community and Society*, 177–78), e.g., talks of “of two diametrically opposed systems of law: one in which human beings are related to each other as natural members (or parts) of a whole, and another where they come into relation with each other as independent individuals, merely by virtue of their own rational wills.”

4. Primordialism is a position that scholars today tend to ascribe to others, rather than endorse themselves. For a rare, serious defense of the approach in recent scholarship, see Grosby, *Nationalism*, and “The Verdict of History.” I should note, however, that Grosby, like myself, believes that we need to get beyond the *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* dichotomy if we want to make sense of nationalism. See Grosby, “Nationalism and Social Theory.”

In my alternative model, it is a moral relationship between individuals, which I call social friendship, that makes a community.<sup>5</sup> Communities connect us by means of our disposition to show special concern and loyalty to people with whom we share things, rather than through our subordination to or merging with the group. These feelings of mutual concern and loyalty, unlike the submergence of individuals in the group, are a common feature of everyday life, though they vary in depth and intensity from one form of community to another. For the members of some communities we are disposed to sacrifice a minute of our time; for the members of others, our lives. But every form of community relies on these moral sentiments to establish connections among individuals.

Community, I shall argue, has taken so many different forms because human beings share so many different things—from places and practices to beliefs, choices, and lineages—that can be imagined as sources of mutual connection. From this perspective, the relatively small and tightly integrated groups that our theoretical vocabulary associates with the term represent a particular species of community, one that has less prominence in our lives now than it once had. The nation represents a different species of community, an intergenerational community whose members are connected by feelings of mutual concern and loyalty for people with whom they share a heritage of cultural symbols and stories.<sup>6</sup>

Since this alternative model of community does not demand the surrender of individual will or identity associated with older and more familiar models, it does not compel us to choose between nation and individual as the focus of analysis, between primordialist theories of nationalism that exaggerate our loss of individuality and modernist theories that underestimate the depth and genuineness of our communal attachments. We have every reason to unmask the efforts that nations often make to extend their reach deep into the past, all the way back to the kind of small, tightly integrated communities associated with the concept of *gemeinschaft*. But we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The fact that nations falsely claim one form of intergenerational community should not lead us to ignore the kind of intergenerational community that they actually do possess. Unfortu-

5. I present this theory of community in chapter 2, "The Moral Psychology of Community."

6. I defend this understanding of national community in chapter 3, "What Then Is a Nation?"

nately, as long as we continue to employ conceptual dichotomies that oppose community to voluntary, impersonal, and distinctly modern forms of association, we will probably continue to do so.

The rise of nationalism does not represent the return of some repressed desire to surrender ourselves to the group. But it does draw on and intensify our disposition to show special concern and loyalty toward people with whom we share things. That is why I believe that we cannot make sense of the place of nations and nationalism in our lives until we develop a better understanding of the moral psychology of community and its role in everyday life.

### **Nationalism and Liberal Individualism**

The prominence of nations and nationalism in modern political life poses special problems for liberals, since they generally welcome the loosening of intergenerational ties as a measure of moral and political progress. In the liberal vision of history, increasingly cosmopolitan individuals were supposed to inherit the earth from authoritarian patriarchs and religious moralists. As things have turned out, however, they have had to share that inheritance with nations. For the age of liberal individualism has been the great age of nationalism as well, at least so far. Every major landmark in the spread of liberal democracy since the end of the seventeenth century—the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutions of 1848, the American Civil War, the collapse of the European empires at the end of World War I, decolonization after World War II, and the dissolution of the Soviet Empire in 1989—is also a landmark in the spread of nationalist sentiments. The modern enhancement of individual rights and autonomy seems to be connected in some way to the spread of a new and immensely powerful expression of communal loyalty.

Most liberal theorists find this development rather perplexing, since inherited community “is not, we are repeatedly told, the approach favored in our modern world of free and autonomous individuals.”<sup>7</sup> Marxists, Ernest Gellner once joked, felt compelled to come up with a “wrong address” theory in order to explain why the message that history had prepared for the workers of the world had been delivered instead to na-

7. Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery*, 115.



tions.<sup>8</sup> Liberals, it seems, face a similar challenge, although they are only now beginning to address it. Some, like John Dunn, suggest that there has been a massive betrayal of liberal principles, “a habit of accommodation of which we feel the moral shabbiness readily enough ourselves.”<sup>9</sup> Others, like Yael Tamir, suggest that we must have access to a distinctly liberal form of nationalism, one that allows us “to translate nationalist arguments into [the] liberal language” of individual rights and voluntary association.<sup>10</sup> Both groups agree, however, that the task is to bring liberal practice into line with the familiar image of a modern world of free and autonomous individuals. They disagree merely about whether we need to abandon nations and nationalism in order to do so.

Yet if national loyalties play such a prominent role in our world of relatively free and autonomous individuals, then might that not suggest that there is something wrong with what we are repeatedly told about it? I think so. It appears that there is much more room in that world for communal loyalty and intergenerational connection than we have been led to believe. Imagining nation and state as voluntary associations of independent individuals may have helped us win the fight against patriarchy, paternalism, and aristocratic privilege. But it prepares us poorly for dealing with the communal loyalties that continue to inform our moral life and the forms of membership that most of us enter involuntarily, by means of the contingencies of birth. Whether it is the explanation or the evaluation of nationalism that we seek, we need to broaden the understanding of human association that informs the most familiar pictures of the liberal political world.

If you believe that inherited communal loyalties are an anomaly in the modern political world, then the connections between nationalism and liberal individualism can only be explained if one of these ideologies has triumphed over the other: either liberals have been seduced by nationalist passions or they have found a means of remaking nationalism over in their own image. But if we revise and loosen our understanding of community in the ways in which I have recommended, we open the door to other and better ways of accounting for these connections. For while the tight-knit, tradition-bound, and patriarchal forms of community that we associate with the concept of *gemeinschaft* leave little room

8. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 129.

9. Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, 57–59.

10. Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*, 14.