New Blackfriars

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Imagining Community

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Introduction

We have grown used to the idea that one's nationality serves as a significant aspect of a person's identity. But is one's nationality an essential part of one's identity? Nationalism, as an ideology, tends to suggest that nationality is the defining aspect of one's identity. Yet such a view has, at least in part, brought about a situation where the modern world has known little but war and bloodshed. It may be argued that through nationalism we are led to focus more on that which separates human beings than on that which unites them. Is nationalism an inevitable part of our way of looking at the world? Or might we see that nationalism, while being a part of our human history, is not the only or the best way for humans to define their being in the world?

In this paper I intend to examine the nature of nationalism and will suggest that nationalism is only one way of imagining human being. Since it is a form of imagining, and nothing more than that, one needs to ask if nationalism provides us with the best or the most appropriate way in which we can define our human identity. I will argue that, whatever the merits of nationalism as a theory, the results of nationalism are enough for us to see that there might be more fulfilling ways of imagining community. I will offer John Macmurray's vision of community as an alternative approach to imagining our life together, an approach which may assist us in moving away from the terrible results of nationalist ideology.

How are we to understand Nationalism?

A look at the literature on the question of Nationalism quickly reveals that there are almost as many theories of Nationalism as there are nation-states in our contemporary world. This means that one must make choices about which theory to accept. In this paper I will accept the vision of nations as imagined communities, a theory upheld by Benedict Anderson amongst others.

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Before expressing the main points of his theory however it may be useful to express some commonly accepted notions of nationalism and to draw a basic distinction between what is generally termed civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism.

From a political perspective nationalism is the idea that the world is divided into nations and that each of the world's nations has the right to self-determination. On the cultural level it is frequently argued that while people have many identities, the nation is that which provides us with our primary form of identity and belonging. On the moral level there comes the idea that each of us has certain particular moral responsibilities to those of our nation, such as being prepared to justify violence in the defence of one's nation against enemies either internal or external.

The idea behind civic nationalism is that the nation is made up of all those who subscribe to the nation's political creed, regardless of race, colour, gender, religious beliefs, language or ethnicity. The nation is presented as a community of equal, right-bearing citizens who share a patriotic attachment to certain shared values and political practices. Most western nation states today define their nationhood in terms of common citizenship rather than by common ethnicity.

Ethnic nationalism tends to state that what gives unity to a nation is not so much the concept of shared rights and responsibilities but rather the people's pre-existing ethnic characteristics; things like language, religion, customs and traditions. The suggestion behind ethnic nationalism is that, as individuals, our deepest attachments are not chosen but rather inherited. In such a view it is the national community which clearly defines the individual, not the individuals who together define the national community.

It is a matter of debate whether any specific nation can in actual fact be determined as expressing either a strictly civic or ethnic nationalism. Margareta Mary Nikolas, for example, argues that nationalism is the same sport on both sides of the fence – the civic and the ethnic, the political and the cultural. Each of these elements are to be understood as components of this game and not exclusive to any particular side, regardless of how the game originally emerged. While it may be true that some nationalisms concentrate more heavily on some components than others, without all the components together there would not be a Nationalism.

The Nation as Imagined Community

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson offers the following definition of the nation:

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> "It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". (Imagined Communities, p. 15).

Anderson suggests that nations are imagined in various ways. They are imagined because the member of a nation will never know or be able to personally know most of her fellow members yet in the mind of each national lives the idea of their communion with one another.

The nation is also imagined as being somehow limited because each nation is marked by finite, if elastic, boundaries beyond which lie other nations. At the same time, the nation is also imagined as sovereign, a concept that emerges in the age of Enlightenment.

The nation can also be imagined as community because the rhetoric of nationalism suggests a deep relationship between members of the same nation, even although all nations are guilty of various forms of inequality and exploitation.

Anderson suggests that the roots of national consciousness and the possibility of imagining nations begin with the breakdown of traditional religious and dynastic ways of understanding the world. With the decline of the idea of sacred communities and hierarchical dynasties there arose the possibility of apprehending the world differently.

Nations, for Anderson and many other scholars, are therefore to be understood as aspects of Modernity. The impact of the Reformation and the introduction of printing allowed people to imagine themselves and society in a new way. The primacy of capitalism is understood to be a significant factor too.

> "The convergence of capitalism and print technology on the diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community which . . . set the stage for the modern nation". (Imagined Communities, p. 49)

Anderson sees the 19th and 20th centuries as being the age of Nationalism. He argues that the growth in literacy, commerce, industry, communications and state machineries all helped to create a climate where the nations could be imagined as community. Throughout this period the nation-state became more and more clearly the legitimate international norm.

While it is impossible to deny the fact that nationalism has been one of the dominant ideologies of recent times, it is also true that many people believe that the experience of nationalism has not been a happy one. Many would accept the view expressed in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* that:

> "The process of constructing the nation, which renewed the concept of sovereignty and gave it a new definition, quickly became in each and every historical context an ideological nightmare". (Empire, 97).

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One has only to look at the history of the 20th century to see that countless unimaginable horrors have been conducted in the name of these nations which are primarily imagined communities. But it remains impossible to say with any certainty that the age of nationalism has gone, or that the violence and hatred which form so much a part of the age of nationalism, are now things of the past.

For most people, nations, especially their own nations, appear to be perennial and immemorial. They cannot easily imagine a world without nations, nor are they happy with the idea that their nation is a recent creation. Today, however, most scholars would regard the idea of nations existing perennially through antiquity and the middle ages as simply 'retrospective nationalism'. For most post-war scholars, nations and nationalisms are fairly recent phenomena, arising immediately before, during or in the wake of the French Revolution. They also tend to see nations and nationalisms as products of modernisation and features of modernity.

Anderson's contribution is important because it addresses the centrality of the "image" in creating a national reality. A community is contingent on its members sustaining a certain image of it that is based on their perceptions and feelings. In designating the nation as an imagined community or tradition, we do not deny its reality or consider it a fabrication. There is nothing contradictory about saying that something is both imagined and real.

If we accept Anderson's view that nations are primarily imagined communities then we may legitimately ask whether such imagined communities offer the best possible world for people to live in and whether the actual lived experience of nationalism has assisted in making the world an easier place for people of all nations to live in communion.

Ethical difficulties in Nationalism

One of the values of describing nations as imagined communities is that it makes clear the psychological aspect of nationhood. We seem to have a need to belong. Nationalism, in emphasising the ideas of shared culture and history, of shared language and stories, clearly offers much appeal to many individuals. The fact that many people still speak of pride in their country, that many people are still prepared to give up their lives for their nation shows that nationalism, however recent its history, does offer to countless people a sense of belonging.

But, however true it may be that nationalism does provide people with a sense of shared history and a feeling of belonging, that in itself does not prove that nationalism is the best or the most ethically appropriate way to foster such valuable feelings.

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In his book *Humanity* Jonathon Glover, reflecting on these positive aspects of nationalism, states:

> "We now see the case for greater sympathy with nationalism, a case based on the contribution national loyalties make to people and their sense of identity. But this makes nations only of instrumental value. They are to be judged by the good and bad contributions they make to the lives of people". (Humanity, p. 149).

One of the difficulties with nationalism is that it tends to suggest that nationality is the characteristic which most defines a person's identity. Yet can it be proved that our identity is predominantly a national one? Is it not the case that many people find their identity in other ways? It is clear that many people find their appropriate identity in their religious belief, or in their profession or in their personal relations. The fact that nationalism is a modern invention suggests that the vast majority of people who have lived managed to find their identity without any sense of national belonging.

There would seem to me to be no grounds to assume that for most people national identification - when it exists - excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. In fact, it is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them.

Even in accepting that there are ways in which members do acquire some sense of belonging to their nation, such a sense of belonging may carry dimensions which are ethically unjustifiable. For example, much nationalist rhetoric encourages citizens to differentiate their own nation state and its way of life from other nation states and their way of life. Such a distinction is invidious. One's own nation is compared favourably with other nation states in moral or aesthetic terms.

Nationalism depends on people operating through binary divisions. It encourages people to think in terms of *us* and *them*. It tends to create conditions of divisiveness between humans without being able to justify such divisions. And one of the major difficulties in the whole concept of nationalism is that it fosters the condition where people are to focus on the elements of their identity which separate them from most other human beings. Can this possibly be justified as being the most appropriate manner of imagining communities?

If it is true, as has been suggested, that nationalism is a hybrid of both civic and ethnic elements, then we quickly see another ethical problem with nationalism. A glimpse at the effects of nationalism in the 20th century shows that millions of people have died as a result of ethnic and national wars. Would the Holocaust have been possible without the virulent form of nationalism to be found in Hitler's Germany? Has the break-up of Yugoslavia not brought about

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a situation where many people in Eastern Europe have died as a result of unethical nationalism? Would the horrors of ethnic cleansing be possible without a nationalist ideology to support it? By highlighting the ethnic and national differences between people we make more likely the possibility of hatred, racism and violence. It is not my intention to suggest that all hatred, division and violence is the result of nationalism. But if nationalism has managed to generate so much violence and bloodshed even in our lifetime does that not call into question nationalism's ability to offer humanity an appropriate way to live? Is it not possible to find a way of imagining community that lessens the possibility of hatred and violence in our world?

One more difficulty with the practice of nationalism is that it has in many cases created a climate where a state can both physically and mentally manipulate its people. Nationalism has shown itself to be a leading sponsor of war and world division. It is also an essential quality of a people in whom a government can hope to arouse racial and ethnic beliefs of superiority. It is common enough that the people of a country, in giving way to nationalistic frenzy, will feel that they, and their country, are superior in some way to all other peoples and countries. Is this not the current state of America; to such a degree, indeed, that members of other nations are led to call this nation the *Great Satan*? It is this social superiority complex that can, and has consistently, led to war, hatred, and division.

In their book *Empire* Hardt and Negri suggest that one of the difficulties of nationalism is that rather than being seen as simply one way of imagining community, the rhetoric of nationalism suggests that it is the only way of imagining community.

> "It may be true. . .that a nation should be understood as an imagined community but. . .the claim is inverted so that *the nation becomes the only way to imagine community!* Every imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a nation, and hence our conception of community is severely impoverished". (Empire, p. 107).

We have reached the point where we can suggest that nationalism, whatever its strengths might be in giving people a sense of belonging and identity, has been at least in part responsible for great human suffering. As a way of imagining community, it has done more harm than good. That in itself is justification enough to declare that we need to look elsewhere for a different, and more ethical, way to imagine community.

Community as imagined by John Macmurray

One person who might offer us a different way of imagining community is the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891–1976).

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Having lived through the horror of two world wars, Macmurray was convinced that society and philosophy too needed to find a way to overcome the crisis of the contemporary world. His own particular effort was to suggest a fresh understanding of the human person; an understanding which, if taken seriously, would also provide us with a different way to imagine community. We might now take a closer look at Macmurray's vision of the person and the human need for community.

In his book *Persons in Relations*, Macmurray draws a distinction between society and community. He suggests that the traditional philosophical analysis of society takes the form of a philosophy of the State. This points to the fact that we tend to think that the nation or the state is the criterion of a complete and mature society. Macmurray goes on to offer an analysis of the political philosophy of Hobbes and Rousseau, and suggests that neither is able to offer an adequate understanding of the state or the person's place within the state. Hobbes is basically wrong because he can see nothing in human nature which can provide a bond of unity between human beings. As a result, politics and human relations are based on fear and on self-interest. Rousseau, while focussing more on liberal human ideals, is also judged to be wrong. Macmurray believes that the members of a society in Rousseau's vision remain a group of isolated individuals whose lives are private and separate but who rely on the protection of the state to enhance their individual rights. This too is to be seen as an inadequate image.

Macmurray wants to suggest that by focussing on the possibility of community rather than on the reality of society we might be able to move away from the understanding that human relations are grounded on fear and see that human relations and societies can be marked by the intention of friendship.

> "It may serve us well if we distinguish between society and community, reserving the term community for such personal unities of persons as are based on a positive personal motivation. The members of a community are in communion with one another, and their association is a fellowship. . .Every community is a society; but not every society is a community". (Persons in Relation, p. 146).

Before attempting to offer his vision of community Macmurray draws out the reasons why the rationale behind states and nations presents an image which fails to do full justice to human nature. The conception people have of their relations to one another largely determines those relations themselves. If our starting point is that other individuals, states or nations are a threat to our well-being, then our relations with other individuals, states and nations will be marked by fear and negativity. The violence between individuals, states and nations is, in many cases, grounded in fear of the other.

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The major distinction between community and any other form of society is that community is grounded not in fear but in the intending of communion and friendship. Macmurray sees the family as the original community and the basis of all subsequent communities. The image of the family serves as the norm of all community, and offers the hope that human relations can be marked, not by fear and competition, but by love and friendship and trust.

> "What is characteristic of the family is that it is…established and maintained by natural affection; by a positive motive in its members. They care for one another sufficiently to have no need to fear one another". (Persons in Relation, p. 156).

Macmurray has no intention of denying the fact that we live within a context of states and nations. But he wants to suggest that by understanding ourselves only within the parameters of nationalism we confine ourselves to a very limited notion of personhood.

By examining the qualities of a relationship of friendship between two individuals we can come to an appreciation of the true nature of community and contrast relationships based on love and those based on fear.

The relationship between friends is a positive one. It is based on the desire for unity, a unity of persons. Each remains a distinct individual but each realizes herself through the other. It is a relationship of equality, an equality which is intentional. In friendship each person is able to experience real freedom. Since there is no fear of the other, each person can be freely herself.

Macmurray wants to suggest that the qualities to be found in friendships are the same qualities that one finds in community. Therefore, equality, freedom and a lack of fear should be distinguishing marks of any community. But the significant aspect of Macmurray's view is that, if the idea of community is to be properly effective in offering a better model of human relations than that offered by nationalism and other political ideologies, it must be in principle inclusive and without limits. Macmurray believes that it is possible for us to seek a universal community of persons, one in which each cares for all the others. The unity of all peoples becomes possible when we first imagine community as a matter of intention. It is possible for us to move beyond fear in our relations and to move beyond the limits of nationalism by intending friendship and communion with all others.

Macmurray was not unaware of the criticisms made of such a view. In an age where it is difficult to know even one's neighbours never mind the people of other nations the idea of a universal community can easily appear as, at best, naïve. With this in mind, Macmurray develops the distinction between direct and indirect relations. He acknowledges that community can be actual only where

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people are in direct relation to one another, where people know one another personally.

It is precisely because most of our relations are indirect that there is need of politics, law and nations or states. Politics is concerned with the improving and adjusting of indirect relations with others. The state or the nation is the institutional expression of indirect relations, and the most important function of the nation is to maintain justice in indirect relations.

> "The necessity for the State and for politics arises with the breakdown of the customary community of direct personal relations. . .It was this growth of a system of indirect personal relations, superimposed upon the direct relations within the separate communities, which made politics a necessity". (Persons in Relation, pp. 192–193).

In all human relations, direct or indirect, there is a need for justice. Because so many of our relations are indirect there is the need for a mechanism which will maintain those relations in peace. It is the law which serves as this mechanism. The role of the nation or the state is to act in service of the law, ensuring justice for all people. The significant thing for Macmurray is that the law is nothing other than a technological device to maintain indirect relations, and the state or the nation is primarily a technical device for the development and maintenance of law. This suggests that the nation is simply a tool for creating and maintaining relations, and not the primary source of a person's identity.

> "We should treat the law, and the State which is the creature of law, for no less but also for no more than it is – a necessary system of devices for achieving and maintaining justice. If we do this we will then realise that justice itself is not enough. For justice is only the negative aspect of morality, and itself is for the sake of friendship". (Persons in Relation, p. 205).

Macmurray is able to acknowledge the existence of, and even the necessity for, states and nations but he is not prepared to admit that one can find the truth of one's identity in the ideas associated with nationalism. He suggests that we are able to imagine another form of community. In such a community each person acts out of the intention to make friendship the heart of all direct relations, and justice is understood as being simply the minimum requirement in all our human relations, direct or indirect.

Conclusion

In this paper I have focussed on the idea that communities are essentially imagined. Nationalism, as perhaps the dominant ideology

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of the 19th and 20th centuries, is simply one manner of imagining community. While we cannot deny the reality that nations and states have become one of the ways in which humans define themselves, there is no reason to accept that one's nationality is the primary or the most appropriate definition of one's being.

In the light of this, one is able to ask whether nationalism is best able to provide us with a framework in which to live and to relate to one another. Or is there another way of imagining community which may better allow human beings to flourish?

It is my contention that nationalism, as a way of imagining community, has been tried but has been found wanting. The history of the 20th century reveals that nationalism has not made the world a better place, but has rather brought about a situation where humans live in constant fear of one another.

Might there not be a way of imagining community which gives fuller expression to what humans share in common, rather than on that which separates us? I believe that John Macmurray offers us a way forward, a way where, by intending friendship and communion with everyone, we are at least set free from fear and able to recognise our common humanity. It may be the case that Macmurray's vision is lacking in concrete details about how exactly to create a universal community. But, unlike nationalism, it has not yet been tried or attempted.

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