



Nationalism, Modern Systems, and the Ethics of Genocide: Exploring the Role of Moral Blindness in Globalized Societies

Avery J. Prewitt

Master's student, International Relations Department, Tsinghua University

Abstract

The relationship between nationalism and modern global systems is intricate, reflecting how nationalism, once rooted in identity, culture, and self-determination, has evolved into a force that can be both unifying and destructive. Philosophers like Herder and Mazzini envisioned nationalism as a means to foster autonomy and moral purpose. However, in an interconnected world, nationalism can become corrupted by global systems, leading to ethical detachment, diffusion of responsibility, and even violence. While promoting unity, modern technology and bureaucratic systems can also desensitize individuals to moral considerations, allowing nationalism to fuel exclusionary ideologies. The Rwandan Genocide exemplifies this dark potential, where nationalist fervor intertwined with modern mechanisms to justify atrocities. This paper examines how nationalism's interplay with global systems challenges human dignity and questions our ability to maintain ethical integrity in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Globalization, nationalism, identity, fragmentation, genocide

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.

—Immanuel Kant

Nationalism, at its core, is a philosophical ideology that emphasizes a nation's unique identity, culture, and sovereignty, fostering a deep sense of collective belonging among its people. It asserts that political legitimacy and moral obligations are rooted in the self-determination and unity of the national community. However, in modern global systems characterized by bureaucratic efficiency, technological advancements, and complex interconnections, nationalism can become corrupted. This can lead to ethical detachment and dehumanization. Modern systems, which place emphasis on rationality and functionality, often prioritize these aspects over moral considerations. This results in a diffusion of responsibility where individuals feel less personally accountable for the consequences of their actions. This environment fosters moral blindness and dulls ethical sensitivities. When nationalism intertwines with these systems, it can further exacerbate ethical detachment, promoting an exclusionary “us versus them” mentality that justifies discrimination and violence. In a globalized world, the impersonal nature of these systems can desensitize individuals to the human impact of their decisions, facilitating large-scale atrocities such as genocide. The following analysis will explore how the interplay between nationalism and modern global systems contributes to moral blindness and the erosion of human dignity in our interconnected society.

The concept of nationalism, conceptualized during the Enlightenment era, emerged with the idea of nations characterized by distinct cultural and linguistic traits. Johann Gottfried Herder, a disciple of Kant, explored this in his work *“Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man,”* where he presents the nation as a divine gift. Utilizing a metaphorical statement from the perspective of God, “Whatever of noble and excellent thy nature will permit thee to produce; bring forth: I will assist thee by no miracle; for I have placed thy own fate in thy hand,” Herder illustrates how the nation serves as a framework within which individuals can develop autonomy and determine their futures.¹ He likens the nation to a “school,” a vital source of intellectual and artistic expressions that propel humanity's advancement towards enlightenment. Furthermore, each nation possesses an intrinsic spirit, or *Volksgeist*, which drives human progress and autonomy and encourages deep reflection on our identities, shaped by the dynamic interplay of language, culture, and history.² Building on this philosophical foundation, Giuseppe Mazzini introduced a dynamic political dimension to nationalism in the 19th century. In contrast to Herder's cultural focus, Mazzini, in *“The Duties of Man,”* argued that nations are not merely products of history or culture but are imbued with a moral purpose. He asserts, “was provided for you by God [as] He gave you a country” to emphasize that nations assist humanity in achieving its collective potential and promoting universal brotherhood, a notable shift from Herder's contemplative cultural nationalism to a more action-oriented political nationalism.³ True nationalism is not just about cultural identity, but also about active participation in the nation's political life. It's about each citizen making a meaningful contribution to the common good and working towards moral and spiritual upliftment.

In the modern era, the foundational ideals of nationalism, as envisioned by thinkers like Herder and Mazzini, confront the stark realities of global systems characterized by bureaucratic

¹ Herder, Johann G. 1800. *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. London: Printed for J. Johnson, by L. Hansard, 422.

² *Ibid.*, 425.

³ Mazzini, Guisuppe. 1862. *The Duties of Man*. London: Chapman & Hall, 58.

efficiency, technological advancements, and intricate interconnections. As these global systems extend their reach, they often impose a standardizing influence, metaphorically described as “world politics is for a nation what megalomania is for an individual.”⁴ This comparison underscores the risk of nations losing their distinct identities and values in pursuit of disproportionate influence or homogeneity, akin to how individuals with megalomania lose touch with reality due to their grandiose delusions. Such dynamics threaten to diminish the distinct *Volksgeist* of nations, potentially leading to a cultural flattening where unique traditions and languages are at risk of being submerged by a ubiquitous global culture. Echoing these concerns, Hannah Arendt in “*The Origins of Totalitarianism*” highlights the inherent limitations of the nation-state model, arguing that “the nation-state is least suited for unlimited growth...[as] no nation-state could with a clear conscience ever try to conquer foreign peoples.”⁵ This assertion reinforces the dangers of overextending national boundaries—whether through force or cultural exchange—in an interconnected world.

As Benedict Anderson argues in “*Imagined Communities*,” while the traditional nation-state may appear to be diminishing in an era of globalization, nationalism continues to thrive in multi-ethnic states through the powerful force of imagined connectedness, where diverse populations come to perceive themselves as part of a unified national community despite their differences.⁶ This phenomenon of imagined connectedness highlights a paradoxical aspect of modern nationalism as “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”⁷ in which the physical boundaries of nation-states become less relevant due to technological advancements and economic interdependence, the psychological and emotional bonds facilitated by shared narratives and media representations become more significant. In this context, the very systems that seem to undermine traditional nation-states—such as global media networks and multinational corporations—simultaneously foster a new form of nationalism that can transcend geographic and ethnic divisions. However, this resurgence of nationalism is not without its ethical risks.

As nationalism becomes increasingly mediated by technology and driven by abstract notions of community, there is a growing potential for moral blindness. The collective identity fostered by national narratives can obscure the individual's sense of responsibility, leading to a diffusion of accountability when actions taken in the name of national interest cause harm or injustice. Thus, while enabling an unprecedented connectedness, modern global systems also pose significant challenges to maintaining ethical integrity and human dignity. These dynamics appear most visible within the darkest periods of human history. One poignant example is the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, where deep-seated ethnic nationalism, intensified by colonial legacies and modern political manipulations, led to the mass slaughter of the Tutsi population by the majority of Hutus. This genocide, resulting in the deaths of approximately 800,000 people within just a few months, illustrates the extreme consequences of ethical detachment and moral blindness driven by nationalist fervor.⁸ The international community's failure to intervene effectively, despite clear

⁴ Hasse, Ernst. 1897. *Deutsche Weltpolitik*. 5th ed. N.p.: Flugschriften des Alldeutschen Verbandes, 1.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 126.

⁶ Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, New York: Quebecor Wodd, Fairfield, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ Gourevitch, Philip. 1998. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*. United States of America: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

indications of the impending crisis, further highlights the challenges of global systems in responding to nationalistic violence. Through this case study, there is insight into how narratives of ethnic superiority and historical grievances were utilized to justify and mobilize mass violence, ultimately questioning the ethical responsibilities of both national leaders and international bodies.

As we navigate the complexities of nationalism and global interconnectedness, it becomes clear that while nationalism fosters identity and belonging, its intersection with global systems often presents ethical challenges and moral blind spots. The impersonal nature of these interactions can reduce accountability, as exemplified by events like the Rwandan Genocide, where nationalism, amplified by modern mechanisms, led to severe human rights abuses. However, it is crucial to consider the counterarguments and broader impacts of nationalism on a global scale. When channeled through inclusive and civic frameworks, nationalism can promote political engagement, fortify communities, and preserve cultural heritage. The challenge lies in harnessing this force constructively, promoting a global ethos of respect and diversity rather than division and exclusion. As we grapple with the interplay of nationalism and global systems, we must remember that the true test of global society will not be how well we can elevate our own nation but how effectively we can uphold humanity's dignity across all borders.

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