The Unfinished Ethics of Nationalism

Noé Liénard
Master's student, International Relations Department, Tsinghua University

Abstract: This essay examines the ethical significance of nationalism in the context of globalization, arguing that nationalism should be understood as a constitutive condition of modern political selfhood. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, the essay contends that nationalism enables collective self-determination by allowing societies to imagine themselves as sovereign political agents. Its ethical grounding lies in the universal recognition of each community's right to define its own historical and political identity. At the same time, nationalism contains an inherent paradox: the aspiration for self-rule exists within a global order marked by imperialism, inequality, and competing national claims. Through an analysis of the 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy in the People's Republic of China, the essay illustrates how nationalism can function as a dynamic process of collective self-legislation rather than rigid ideological dogma. Ultimately, the essay argues that ethical nationalism is sustained through continuous self-critique and mutual recognition, seeking a world in which the self-determination of one people does not negate that of another.

Keywords: *Nationalism, globalization, self-determination, Imagined Communities*

Introduction

The ethical evaluation of nationalism appears to be an interesting but complex one in today's globalized world. The question of whether or not nationalism is ethically valid is not one of whether nationalism is natural or ancient—there is obvious evidence of its modernity—but is one of whether there is a moral weight to the idea of self-determination that is able to reconcile both particularism as well as universalism. So, the argument is that nationalism's ethical status is not in any way reliant on one particular doctrine of exclusion or sovereignty. Everything lies on its contradictions as both an inevitable and constitutive project of modern political imagination. We really see that its ethical grounding is not located in how particular instances of it might play out uniformly in practice, but is instead located in how it inherently demands that imagined communities find an identity for themselves in the world.

First, we need to acknowledge that modern nationalism is not a rival ideology to many others in the world of politics, but rather a condition for the possibility of the projects of modernity to express the value and agency of the collective. Most of us do not first imagine ourselves as full members of a global civic community and then, as an afterthought, choose national affiliations. Instead, the possibility of imagining ourselves as part of a limited and sovereign community that evolves in a homogeneous flow of time is the condition of the modern political subject. And this act of imagination, as Benedict Anderson has so effectively argued, was a historical result of the "explosive interaction" of print capitalism, the roughness of linguistic diversity and the decline of sacred imagined communities.[1] The newspaper reader in Caracas or the pilgrim creole functionary in Latin America began to sense a "deep, horizontal comradeship" that was entirely new. This imagining of the nation is the first act of the modern project of political autonomy; it enables the collective "we" to deliberate about its collective should and ought. Behind this line of reasoning lies a highly resonant, though tacit, moral assertion: the right of self-determination. When a society starts forming a vision of itself as a nation, it embodies a principle of collective self-legislation: respecting the integrity of our own imagined community (of its own history, language, and right of self-definition) will necessarily lead us toward a respect for the integrity of others. In the universality of its moral message, nationalism reveals its essence: the recognition of a politicized self-consciousness presupposing a world of selves because of the very logic of nationalism as a particular ideological vision. The American and Latin American creoles, in opposition to the metropolitan centers of their cities, began engaging in this constitutive project, claiming the right of their own interpretation of their reality.

Ethics and Nationalism

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

However, this ethical framework of nationalism, which finds political normativity within the self-proclaimed community, is faced with a fundamental challenge: the existence of other communities. While it is possible to imagine a world where nations coexist without conflict, it is clearly not a world we live in. It is a world which reflects imperialism, arbitrary boundaries, "Russifying" colonial education systems, and violence.[2] The distance between the sovereign ideals of self-determination and the world order based on hierarchical global politics is a profound challenge—a paradox at the foundations of nationalism.

It is exactly at this moment that a critical interpretation of historical cases such as the 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy in the PRC becomes very important. According to Michael Schoenhals's account, the debate over whether "practice is the sole criterion of truth" involved much more than an epistemological dispute and represented instead an important political struggle over the source of legitimacy.[3] The "two whatevers" camp, who argued for the scripturalist primacy of Mao's words, represented in fact an ideological dogma that brought together truth with canonical texts.[4] The goal of Hu Yaobang and his supporters, through the advocacy of practice, was instead to move in the opposite direction, grounding legitimacy in living, collective experience rather than in the heavenly "inheritance" of the past. And in this sense, of course, they launched a nationalist project—to affirm the right of the contemporary political community to evaluate at any given time its own path in accordance with present reality rather than remaining eternally bound to the instructions of a kind of sacred founder. The "practice criterion" actually became a tool for the nation to re-legislate for itself, to escape what the article itself called "obscurantism, idealism and cultural despotism."[5]

This vision transforms the ways in which we think about the ethical dilemmas of nationalism in this era of globalization. Nationalism is no longer a sort of static identity to be defended or a chauvinistic impulse to be denounced. Rather, it is a continuous, questioning project. It is the paradox that prevents the national project from becoming a new dogmatism. If there existed a resolution to the tension between a self-contained national identity and a globally interconnected world, it seems to me that we would run the danger of imposing a tyrannizing global homogenization, a totalitarian "ethic of globalization," or a totalized, aggressive ethno-nationalism. In the end, this difficult problem—of how to be a particular "we" in a world of other "we's"— actually keeps the ethical project of nationalism alive and self-correcting. So, the ethical integrity of nationalism in the context of globalization cannot be based on the premise of being the universal example of isolation or supremacy. Indeed, the idea of exporting the politicized notion of the nation-state as a norm is nothing short of political imperialism, which clearly fails to understand its own nature. Real ethical

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983, p. 140.
[3] Michael Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy", *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (1991), pp. 243-268. This article is an answer to "Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Truth", written in 1978 by several Chinese authors but wrongly attributed only to Hu Fuming (Michael Schoenhals himself claims in his article: "Hu was to play a minor role in the writing of "Practice is the sole criterion of truth" entirely by accident", see footnotes page 254).
[4] Michael Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy", *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (1991), p. 249.
[5] "Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Truth", *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, (1993) 25:2, p.41.

nationalism is the right to access the dynamic process of collective self-definition. It is the political commitment to the process of creating the political and social conditions in which the community can express its so-called practical identity without diminishing the same right in another community. Therefore, the ideal application of nationalism will differ whether it involves the linguistic solidarity made possible through the process of print capitalism, the anti-colonial solidarity of the bilingual intelligentsia, or the civic solidarity of multi-ethnic states. Nonetheless, the guiding principle of ethics will be the same: no external authority, no immutable rule, no economic system will have the legitimate right over the people unless it can be made compatible with the people's collectively imagined and practiced concept of self-determination. In conclusion, nationalism is ethically significant as a condition of modern politics rather than a shadow of the past. But the meaning of nationalism originates from within—the imaginative structure of contemporary consciousness according to which we must imagine ourselves as part of a sovereign, historic community. And yet its practice has to be external, exercised in a global field of power we did not create and that is interconnected and often hostile to closed particularisms. If indeed nationalism had already been realized as a sort of harmonious global order of equal nations, the ethics of nationalism would only be a simple fact rather than a compelling problem under consideration. It is rather the continued tension between the dream of self-rule and the reality of inequalities, between the imagined community and the global other that transforms nationalism from a static identity. Through successive acts of critique, this project seeks to create a global order in which the self-determination of each is the condition for the self-determination of all. Its ethical meaning, therefore, resides not in its achieved purity but in its perpetual and demanding self-awareness.

Bibliography

[1] "Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Truth", *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, (1993) 25:2, p.41.

[2] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

[3] Schoenhals, Michael, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy", *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (1991), p. 249.