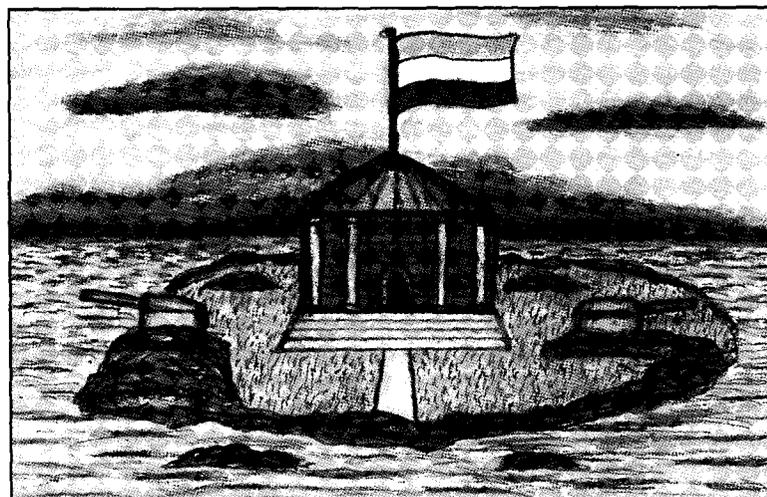


Nationalism *Über Alles*

A Study in Definition

by Alain de Benoist



There are probably as many theories of nationalism as there are nationalisms. Quite apart from the often extremely complex typologies used to classify nationalism, there are two principal definitions worth noting.

In the first sense, *nationalism* is defined as a more or less voluntary aspiration of a people to establish itself as a nation, whether or not there is any objective foundation for it. This aspiration, which most often takes shape when a group feels alienated from a larger group, is then presented as a movement of historical construction. In the second sense, *nationalism* is the political doctrine that insists that a government must concern itself, above all, with the national interest.

The first form of nationalism often stems from, in the words of Carl Schmitt, the “state of exception”—that is, as a reaction to a threat, real or imagined, that would prevent the collective identity from being established. For example, nationalism can manifest itself either in reaction to foreign occupation or colonization, or as part of the framework of exaggerated regionalism. Its essence is, therefore, defined by conflict. It requires an enemy, but this enemy can take on diverse forms. Thus, various nationalisms have been both modern and antimodern, intellectual as well as popular, leftist and rightist. (During the entire 19th century, nationalism was essentially liberal and republican.)

As a political doctrine, nationalism raises other problems. Once an identity has been recovered, or a nation has made its appearance, how can nationalism truly serve as a principle of government? “National interest” is vague. Charles Maurras wrote that a nationalist “subordinates his feelings, his interests, and his way of life to the good of the country.” But what political faction would disagree? “The good of the nation” is a concept to which everyone can lay claim, all the more so since everyone has his own interpretation of it. The risk, then, is great

that a nationalist government could only exist by engaging in new areas of conflict. Every foreigner, for example, will potentially be regarded as an enemy. And confronting the enemy within would result in a civil war, which nationalist theory would seem to forbid on principle.

The concept of nationalism, then, remains obscure. Nationalist movements can be observed worldwide, but they have, for the most part, little in common. In fact, they are usually opposed to one another; they lay claim to contradictory values. Everything points to the probability that nationalism is more a form than a substance, more a container than any specific content.

It is easier to understand nationalism if we clarify its relationship to the idea of the nation, from which it cannot be separated. Nationalism represents a political appropriation of the nation. But the nation is only one form of polity among others, and it is a specifically modern one.

Neither the Gallic resistance to Julius Caesar nor the campaign of Arminius and his Germans against Varus’s legions was nationalist in the modern sense. Applying the word *nation*, whether to antiquity or to the *ancien régime*, involves an anachronism. In the Middle Ages, the nation (*natio*, Latin for “birth”) had a cultural or ethnic sense, not a political one. During the Hundred Years War between France and England, *patriotism* referred to the country (*patria*)—that is, both to the native soil and to a constellation of intermediate bodies that define a shared identity in concrete terms.

In the political sense, the concept of the nation did not appear until the 18th century, when it was used to express opposition to the king. At that time, the patriots were those who thought that the nation, not the king, incarnated the unity of the country—that the nation existed independently of the kingdom. The nation united those who agreed politically and philosophically.

It is in this sense that Barrère, at the Convention, could say

Alain de Benoist is the publisher of the French journal *Krisis*.

that “the aristocrats have no country [*patrie*].” The nation is thus perceived, first, as the sovereign people; then, as the populations that acknowledge the authority of the same state, inhabit the same territory, and see themselves as members of the same political unity; and, finally, as that political unity itself. Article 3 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* states that “The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation.”

The *ancien régime* in France had already gone a long way toward centralizing political power. The French Revolution continued this process in a new form. Its goal was “to produce the nation,” to create a new social bond, to generate patterns of social behavior that would give rise to the nation as a political body made up of equal individuals. From that point on, states became the producers of society, and this production is built upon the ruins of intermediate social bodies. Beginning with the French Revolution, the nation is, for every individual, a fact or given that allows no mediating structures between individual and state. It is a collective abstraction to which one belongs directly, without the mediation of other social bodies or of other states.

“My country, right or wrong”
says that my country can be
right or wrong, not that it is *always right*.

There is, paradoxically, an individualist root for the idea of nationalism. As Louis Dumont observed:

The nation, in the precise modern sense of the term, and nationalism—as opposed to simple patriotism—have been historically allied with the value of individualism. Not only does the one accompany the other historically, but the interdependence between them is such that one could say that the nation is a global society composed of people who consider themselves individuals.

This “modernity” of the nation and of nationalism remained unnoticed for a long time—at first, because nationalism has sometimes also been born in reaction to the social and political dysfunctions that emerged from modernity; later, because the political right, from the end of the 19th century, employed the idea of the nation in order to oppose socialist-internationalist movements.

This individualist and modern basis of the concept of the nation explains how nationalism fits under the umbrella of metaphysical subjectivity. Martin Heidegger explored the subjective basis of nationalism and internationalism, observing that “collectivism is the subjectivity of man on the plane of totality.” He also showed that political universalism (“pure internationalism”) does not fundamentally contradict nationalism. The classic definition of extreme ethnocentrism is “a particular enlarged to universal dimensions.” Universalism, conversely, is ethnocentrism in disguise. The particular, not content with testifying to its own truth, tends to present itself as truth *per se*. Such is the basis for the claim made by certain peoples to be “elect”—called to fulfill a universal mission.

France has not escaped this temptation; indeed, it has suc-

cumbed more often than other nations. Guizot used to declare, “France is the heart of civilization.” Lavissee added, “our fatherland is the most humane of fatherlands,” implying that there are various degrees of humanity. In fact, it has often been said that French nationalism would not know how to be fundamentally intolerant, because, in France, the concept of the nation is directed toward humanity. But this statement should give us pause. In such a case, the concept of humanity is also directed toward the nation. Whoever does not belong to the nation finds himself excluded from humanity.

Not every demand for collective identity is expressed in terms of nationalism. Such a confusion of the two would end up—as we can see in the historic examples of nationalism’s excesses—casting doubt on the value of the entire concept of collective identity. But such a concept, whatever its basis and however expressed, is indispensable to human society. In communist societies, this sense of identity enabled people to survive, by opposing their real identity to the one that the regime was trying to impose. In Western societies, collective identity continues to nourish the imagination and to give meaning to the will to lead a common life. Nationalism, to the extent that it is more tumultuous and more competitive, is no more the inevitable consequence of affirming collective identity than the nation is the only political organization that can express citizenship. It is, rather, the denial of collective identities, such as people encountered during the 20th century under both communism and liberalism, that caused their return in irredentist forms that were convulsive and destructive.

To be more precise, there are two different ways of expressing collective identity. The first, which might be called the nationalist way, is confined to an individual’s defense of his own people, while the second, which is particularly solicitous for diversity, sees the necessity of defending all peoples against the ideologues who threaten to eradicate them. The English phrase, “My country, right or wrong,” is often misunderstood. It does not declare merely that belonging to a country is a given that cannot be turned into an abstraction. It also says that my country can be right or wrong, not that it is *always right*. A nationalist, however, would not know how to recognize that his country is in the wrong, for the simple reason that, for him to be able to declare his country wrong, he would have to possess a criterion of the just and unjust that went beyond the mere fact of belonging to a group. In other words, he would have to possess a clear awareness of what constitutes objective truth. A nationalist is spontaneously led to believe that his country is never wrong, that it is always right. From such a perspective, when conflict arises, force alone can decide the matter. Force becomes the supreme value. It is identified with the true, which means that history is fundamentally just: Conquerors are always right, for the sole reason that they have prevailed. Paradoxically, nationalism falls back into Social Darwinism, which is nothing but another form of the ideology of progress. If, by contrast, I can declare my country in the wrong—without, for one moment, forgetting that it is my country—then I know that my belonging is not a criterion of objective reality. At that point, I depart from the metaphysical subjectivity where nationalism and liberal individualism come together. The identity of other people is no longer, in principle, a threat to my own. I am ready to defend my identity because such a defense is a general principle whose legitimacy I also acknowledge for others. If I defend my tribe, I am also ready, for the same reason, to defend the tribes of other people.

Leokadia and Fireflies

A Story

by Anthony Bukoski



Named Stefanie Karawinski, I'm seventeen years old. The woman in the title of the story, Sister Mary Leokadia, is perhaps fifty. Because the nuns at my grade school here in Superior wear black habits and white, scarf-like wimples covering their hair and ears, I can't tell their ages. They belong to an order founded for Polish and Polish-American women: the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis, whose main convent is in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where I'd stop on the way to Milwaukee if it weren't so far out of the way.

Though this story is about my family, and principally about my dad, and has only a little to do with Sister Leokadia, I'm still naming it for her. Because the nuns do so much for us, and yet remain in the background of our lives, credit is due them. I'm entering Marquette University in the fall partly because of the nuns. Though after attending *Szkoła Wojciecha*, St. Adalbert's grade school, I went to a public high school, I'd still see the nuns in church; they'd have me do odd jobs for them at school, and sometimes Sister Leokadia would visit our house. Because she's a holy presence in the neighborhood, this story is named for her, the nun who taught me in seventh and eighth grades.

I'd never name a story for myself. I shouldn't even use "I" so much, but how else to describe yourself when you're a character in your story? I have medium-length light-brown hair with bangs. In back, my hair is straight, trimmed evenly across. I wish I were as pretty as Mother. I try to be modest in speech and dress, to read a lot, to study writing in the months before college.

Anthony Bukoski, who teaches English at the University of Wisconsin, Superior, is the author of Polonaise: Stories (Southern Methodist University Press).

A tall girl, I blush when teased. I have pale skin. Who isn't pale in June with winter not long over in Northern Wisconsin? I wear glasses for all the reading I do. A photo of Stefanie Karawinski, author and minor character in this, her family's story, would show an average girl, plain in appearance, which is true.

I live with my parents and Dziaduś, Grandpa, a retired seaman in poor health, in a house in the East End. So you'll know both the heredity *and* environment that shape my life, I'll describe the two lower floors of our house, starting with the basement, where dustwebs catch on thin plastic window curtains. In the basement fourteen years ago, Dad built plywood cabinets. During winter, the basement—which, in other seasons, is damp and cool—is the warmest place in the house, for in the center stands a furnace converted to burn natural gas. Tin vents rise through the house carrying warm air to us up here, too. Along with the basement workbench and the furnace are the washing machine, laundry tub, scrub board, and the old coal bin, now made into a storage room. Sometimes even on Memorial Day, the furnace comes on.

Most of our time is spent upstairs, where the cabinets Dad built hang above the sink on one wall and above the refrigerator on another. Other cabinets stand next to the stove. We probably have more plywood cabinets in our kitchen than any household in East End. The door frames and the doors to the back porch and the dining room, wainscoting, baseboards, and other wooden kitchen surfaces are painted with ivory-colored enamel. The kitchen wallpaper is yellow. But what you recall about the kitchen is the plywood cabinets with the clear, reddish-brown stain on them to bring out their grain. I hardly remember the days Dad built them, but I know it took strength for him